Vol. VII, No. 1

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July 5th

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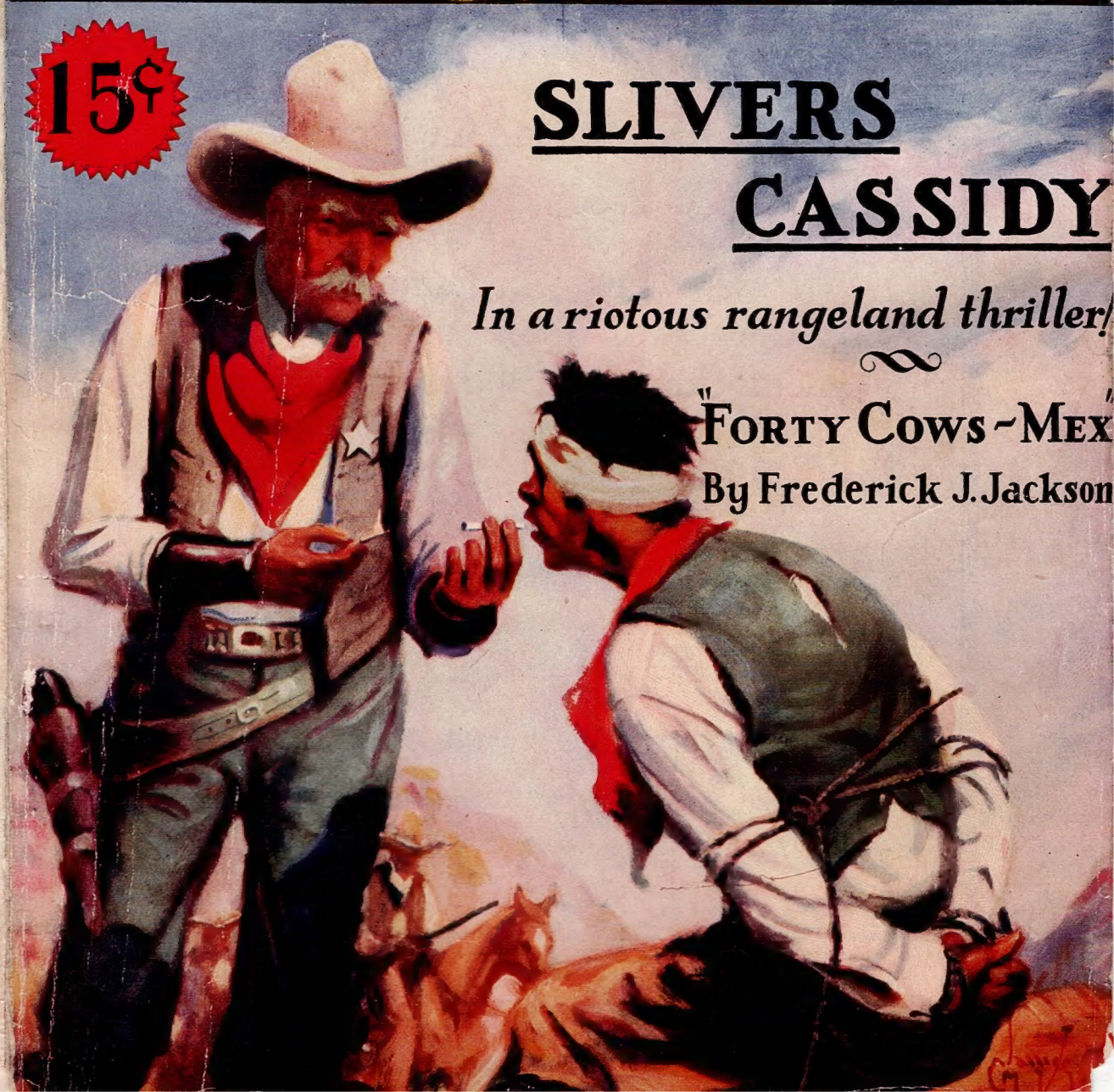
"FORTY COWS ~ MEX"

By Frederick J. Jackson



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July 5th, 1927

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EVERY WEEK

Vol. VII No. 1 JULY 5, 1927

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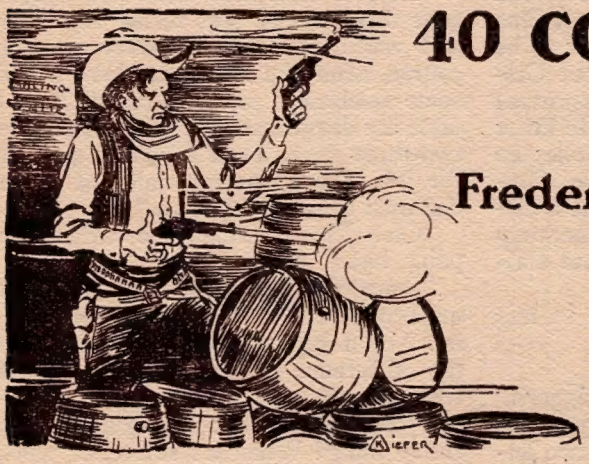


40 COWS — MEX

By

Frederick J. Jackson

Author of "The Derringer," "Knight Errand Cassidy," etc.

When Slivers came back to Tres Pecos, a trap was hungry for him; and even with his fluid six-guns, the best of his chances were slim. But with Standish and Skinner and Blazes—some liquor—a fairly stout jail—he routed the killers and rustlers; his thirty-nine cows took the trail.

CHAPTER I

BEFORE OR AFTER TAKING?

MR. SLIVERS CASSIDY saw the buckboard when it came over a swell half a mile away. He watched it curiously. The rig was strange; it did not belong in the Los Alamos Valley. As it drew nearer and came up through a thin grove of trees toward the Plus One ranch-house he recognized the passenger on the seat alongside the strange driver. Cassidy's face cracked into a wide grin of welcome.

"By golly!" he exclaimed. "Old Shorthand, himself. Gosh! I didn't expect him for another coupla weeks." Shorthand Conway was Cassidy's partner in the recent purchase of the Plus One ranch. Conway, while convalescing from three gunshot wounds, had sent Cassidy forth to invest their combined funds in a ranch. He had taken Cassidy's word for it, when the latter wrote that he had discovered a bargain. And now Conway had arrived to look over, and dwell upon their domain.

Cassidy was a cowboy in his middle thirties. Conway was much older. He had never been a cowboy. He was known as a gunman. He had been with Reno as a scout against the Indians; he had been at various times a ranger, a shotgun messenger, a town marshal, a mine guard and a deputy sheriff. And in the interval between these scattered jobs he had managed to eke out a fairly prosperous livelihood through his combined luck and skill at stud poker. Those who knew Mr. Conway did not care to buck him with a gun or a deck of cards. He was a small, but very deadly and efficient hombre in either line.

Conway and Cassidy had teamed up some weeks before in an attempt to capture a gang of bandits headed by Swapper Brannan. The result of this had been a queer mixture. The gang had been killed. Mr. Conway had been the host to three bullets. Cassidy had been captured, worried and rescued. Conway

and Cassidy had received a considerable sum of "dead or alive" reward money. And they both felt grateful to Wing Lung, a ranch cook, who apparently had departed for his ancestral land, laden with the bandits' loot.

Mr. Conway stiffly dismounted from the buckboard. He limped slightly as he took two steps forward to shake hands with Cassidy. Conway's gray-blue eyes were cold and expressionless as he sized up his younger partner, but Cassidy knew that there was a repressed twinkle behind the blank look. He knew that Conway was saving up a joke; he wondered just what it would be. Conway backed away a few steps. At a distance of about six feet he deliberately walked in a limping circle around Cassidy. He shook his head.

"Is there a schoolhouse here in this valley?" was his question.

"Nope! They ain't. Why?"

"That's sure too bad. I was figgerin' on sendin' you to school—so's you kin learn to write better. I got your two letters; but they was so danged hard to read that I had to do a lot of guessin' as to what you'd set down, or what yuh meant. I sure guessed wrong. Either that—or yuh sure lied like hell."

"What d'yuh mean?"

"Did yuh or did yuh not write me that there was some barrels of good whisky down in the cellar here?"

"I sure wrote it."

"Then yuh lied like hell."

"What d'yuh mean?"

"There's really a lot of whisky in the cellar? Or have yuh managed to drink it all up?"

"Gosh, no! I can't drink *that* much. There's plenty left."

"There is?" Conway shook his head. "If there's any left, how come that you're plumb sober? Answer me that, hey?" Conway shook with repressed laughter.

"Aw—" in weak protest. "Aw—why, yuh insultin' old——"

But Mr. Conway had turned away, to pay the driver of the livery stable buckboard that had brought him from the railroad.

WELL, it's this way," Cassidy explained, half apologetically, a moment later, when the buckboard was going back down the lane through the trees. "I only drink when I'm doin' brain work or when I'm celebratin'. You'd be surprised, Shorthand, at how much thinkin' I did right after I arrived here in the valley. Yep, yuh sure would—and yuh oughta see all them bullet marks over in the patio." Cassidy led the way toward the ranch-house, meanwhile continuing to explain.

"Now, I been here alone for danged near three weeks, jest restin' my brain and waitin' for you to show up. Uh course, after the li'l fracas here I had some celebratin' to do. I admit that I done my dangedest with that whisky for two-three days. Then I had to give up the job. There was too much of it for one man to get away with."

"Oh! You reached the satteration point, hey?" A grin.

"Somethin' like that. I wasn't usin' my brains, and I was through celebratin'. You'd be surprised, Shorthand, at the difference between a li'l bit of whisky—say, up to a coupla bottles—and the rations for a regiment. 'Sa funny thing! When it's scarce, or when yuh gotta pay good money for it, yuh lap up a lotta the danged stuff. When it's free, in wholesale quantities, yuh kinda lose your taste for it. No foolin'! I been sober for a coupla weeks. I take a few drinks once in a while, jest because they're handy; but there ain't no use no more, seems like, to get drunk. Yuh know me, Shorthand; I usta say that I drank only when I was alone or with somebody. Well, I reckon I ain't got no real taste for the stuff, 'cause drinkin' alone got awful monogamous. By golly! I got a good idea. Le's go have a snorter together."

"Your brains have slowed up," said Conway. "Yuh sure took your time in gettin' around to that idea. And there's somethin' blamed fishy about your reformin'. I won't believe it till yuh prove it."

THEY sat at the table in the ranch-house patio. A short time had passed on, while several drinks had passed down. And Cassidy had told in detail his experiences in Los Alamos Valley.

"And to prove it, like that Chinaman used to say, yuh see that second rafter stickin' out up there"—pointing at the adobe wall—"well, that's where we found Cock-Eye Johnson's body a-hangin'."

Mr. Conway squinted at the rafter. "Seems to me," he stated severely, "that all yuh did when I was laid up was tuh run around raisin' hell and havin' a good time drinkin' and shootin' and romancin'."

"Romance, *nawthin'!*" Cassidy denied, almost blushing. "Cock-Eye Johnson's gal is sure a hummer and a lulu, but she's dead stuck on young Meade, who owns the L-D. They'll be gettin' hitched, one of these days. I only done what you would 'a' done in gettin' her out of here and down to a ranch where there's some women folks."

"That's romance, anyway," Conway insisted. "Only it ain't yours. But I still maintain yud did jest what I said yuh did. Yuh did everythin' except some real thinkin'. The ranch may be all yuh say it is—I'm takin' your word for that—but yuh went and saddled a mortgage bigger'n a mountain onto us. Did yuh do any figgerin' 'bout how we were gonna pay it off?"

"Sure. We got some cows. And, in case yuh didn't know about it, cows is in the habit of havin' calves. Calves grow up intuh beef. We sell the beef. Tha's how we pay off the mortgage." Cassidy grinned triumphantly.

"That lesson in natural history is easy to listen to," said Conway. "But I got the idea that all the cows had been stolen before yuh showed up here. I bet yuh ain't even taken a tally."

"Didn't hafta. Can't, anyway, till the next roundup. Young Meade, over on the next ranch, on account of bein' stuck on the girl, has been keepin' cases in a way. We got at least one hundred cows as a starter. And when they has lady calves, them lady calves will grow up to be more cows and start havin' calves of their own. Yuh'd be surprised at how much our stock'll increase in a few years."

"Maybe. What I'm thinkin' of is the size of the mortgage."

"Oh, that ain't worryin' me none."

"I reckon it ain't," dryly. "I admit yuh got brains, but they gallop too fast; they don't come down to earth often enough." Mr. Conway fished out the stub of a pencil and started to write figures on the back of an envelope. "Comin' down on the train," he explained, "I had a seat with a cattle buyer. I ast a lot uh questions, and right now, Slivers, I know more about the business end of stock raisin' than you ever will." A pause. Cassidy mechanically rolled a cigarette, meanwhile keeping his gaze on the moving pencil.

"Jest like I thought," Conway finally announced. "I stuck my money in with your'n in this beefsteak raisin' game on your say-so. But the trouble with you, Slivers, is that yuh never come down to earth long enough to do any honest-to-gosh figgerin'. And a mortgage doesn't worry yuh none, hey? Well, these figgers tell me that it's somethin' to worry about. The increase on one hundred cows'll jest about pay the interest on the mortgage and our livin' expenses while the cows is doin' the increasin'. And we'll have to do some brisk sellin' of the increase right along to do that. How'll we ever be able to put any cash in the bank, to take care of the mortgage when it's due?"

"Gosh! I dunno! I never thought of that." Cassidy was a picture of bewildered dejection. "Honestly, Shorthand, I never meant to get yuh in and lose your money——"

"Well, I ain't gonna lose it!" Conway's lips compressed in a tight line. Then he smiled. "Slivers, you're sure lucky in havin' me for a pardner. I'm a business man, and yuh sure need one in the family. Right now the family bankroll has got over sixteen hundred dollars in it. I figger out that, after payin' the doctor and my travelin' expenses, we still got ninety-six dollars more than we had left after I sent yuh the cash to pay down on this ranch. Yuh see—" with a grin—"that same cattle buyer talked me intuh playin' a little two-handed stud with him on the train. When we got through, I advised him never again to play cards with a stranger. He give me a lot of advice, too—but his was about the cattle game. We gotta git us some more cows."

"That's what I was thinkin'," said Cassidy.

"Yeh, since I mentioned it, yuh probably have."

"Nope! I been thinkin' about it right along. I been wonderin' how much cash, if any, we'd have to stick into gettin' us some more calves' mamas. We can get maybe forty or fifty, and still have a little cash left to carry us till we can sell off some beef stock. And we wanta get some good cows. There ain't much profit in beef that runs all to horns and

laigs. We oughta get us some of them Herefords."

"That cattle buyer told me where a man could pick up some cows right cheap. They was Herefords, too, he said, seems like," mused Shorthand.

"He did? Why didn't he buy them himself?"

"He liked me. He was doin' me a favor in tellin' me."

"Where is this bargain market?"

"Down in Tres Pecos, that's where."

"Oh!" In a peculiar tone. "What I wanta know is this: did he tell yuh that before or *after* yuh won his money at stud?"

"I disremember exactly. What difference does it make?"

"A hell of a lot more than yuh think. Yuh ever been in Tres Pecos?"

"No-o," slowly. "I still can't git your drift."

"Do yuh know the reputation it's got? No? Well, I know all about it. I worked for the C-Bar-4 outfit, once. That's thirty miles north from Tres Pecos. Tres Pecos is a shipping point. It's on the railroad. It's less than twenty miles from the border. I don't like Tres Pecos. I don't like the country anywhere around it. I don't like the people in Tres Pecos, and——"

"Yuh don't like yourself!" Mr. Conway interpolated, as Cassidy hesitated. "Say, what *do* yuh like?"

"This whisky," said Cassidy, helping himself to a drink. "What I was gonna say is that the people down there don't like me. I ain't got no doubts about cows bein' cheap down there, but I got a lot of other doubts."

"Concerning what?"

"Tres Pecos. It's danged near two hundred miles from here. Uh course that ain't no drive—till yuh try it with a bunch uh wild cows. I'd have to hire help, 'cause I gotta sleep once in a while. That's a bad habit I got; and I'm gettin' old. I can't go more than two days without sleep no more." Cassidy enumerated several other objections.

Mr. Conway took them in—along with a couple of drinks. "Well," he finally said, "the way I size it up is that you're plumb scared. We'll wait a coupla weeks till I gits stronger, and then I'll go along and take keer of yuh. What do we give a whoop about the ancestry of the cows, as long as we gits a bill of sale—and gits the critters dirt cheap?"

Which sufficed to wipe all of Cassidy's objections off the slate. Sufficient to say that the older man's offer to "take keer" of Cassidy aroused the latter's pride. The next morning saw Cassidy heading south. In a money belt strapped around his waist, next to his skin, were one thousand dollars of the family bankroll. In a pocket was some cash for expenses. In his heart was considerable resentment at the hint that he was scared. In his mind was a large sized heap of doubt.

Chapter II

SUNDAY CHICKEN

DUSK, one week later, saw Cassidy riding into Tres Pecos. Despite the fact that he had a relief horse with him, he had taken his time on the journey south; had, in fact, made a conscientious effort to purchase some good cows or heifers nearer home. In his mind was the figure 40. He wanted to buy forty cows for one thousand dollars. But good cows—any of the improved breeds—could not be purchased at a figure anywhere near twenty-five dollars a head. They came much higher.

To be sure, he had been offered a bunch of scrubs and culls—several hundred if he wanted them—at a flat figure of eighteen dollars and fifty cents each. And they would be delivered free right in the Los Alamos Valley. But this offer had come from a stock raiser who had but recently seen the light, a man who until now had stuck to his original breed, the old type of cattle which Cassidy had described as "runnin' to nawthin' but laigs and horns." Cassidy had thanked the man, and journeyed on.

Therefore, after thus conscientiously sounding out prices on his trip south, Cassidy held out but little hope of getting a bargain in Tres Pecos. Cattle at the railroad would be worth more than they would be far out on the range. But, of course, there might be a chance of picking up some stock that had come from below the border—stock that for various reasons would not bear strict inspection when it came to brands or a question of original ownership. But any stock from below the border would in all likelihood be of the racy longhorn breed that Cassidy did not want.

Cassidy's one desire was to prove to Shorthand Conway that he, Cassidy, was a good business man. Therefore, in the event that any good cows could be picked up dirt cheap, Cassidy had decided not to strain his eyes by inspecting the brands too closely in the direct rays of sunlight.

On the way south, Cassidy's last call had been at the C-Bar-4 ranch, where he had worked for a time some six years before. The owner had greeted him like a long lost son. The bunkhouse gang had welcomed him heartily. Some of them had been there for over six years. These men had ridden with Cassidy on a desperate raid. The newcomers had heard so much about Cassidy, without ever having seen him, that he had come to be regarded almost as a legendary character. Yes, indeed, he had been welcomed!

AND now, again in Tres Pecos after an absence of six years, Cassidy stabled his horses and then walked back a few rods along the main street to the Socorro Saloon. It was one of the largest and most decorative buildings in the town. The lamps within had just been lighted. Going to a saloon in Tres Pecos was strictly business—or, at least, Cassidy excused himself on that ground. Saloons were still the official places where cattle changed hands. If a buyer wanted to meet a seller he went into a saloon and let his wants become known. And, over a few drinks, negotiations would be completed.

At the doorway of the Socorro, however, Cassidy hesitated briefly, as a small grain of cautiousness asserted itself. He was tense, alert, as he stopped to glance swiftly in turn at every man within. He knew that sooner or later in Tres Pecos he would meet an enemy; for his last visit to town, six years before, had not been a friendly one. He had ridden, at that time, at the head of fourteen armed and grimly determined cowboys from the C-Bar-4. The result of that raid would, in all likelihood, still show its scars. In the windswept, cactus overgrown cemetery outside Tres Pecos were five neglected graves. Several men were still in the penitentiary. And the men in the graves or the prison undoubtedly possessed friends or relatives who were still alive, and who had not forgotten.

Cassidy's swift and searching gaze told him that he recognized none of the men at that moment in the Socorro. He relaxed slightly, but still watched the four men with cues in their hands who were around the pool table, as he stalked across to the bar. A glance had sufficed to dismiss as dangerous possibilities the loungers in the row of cane seated chairs along one wall. The bartender was a stranger. And the poker players at a table in the far corner were too intent on a large pot to pay any attention to him. He would look them over later.

He gained a strategic position at the end of the bar, where it joined the wall. His back was in the corner, his left elbow on the bar. His right shoulder, hunched high, was against the wall. This raising of the shoulder brought his right hand conveniently on the butt of his Colt. He appeared to the casual eye merely to have taken a comfortable position. He had. Knowledge of the quickness with which he could throw a gun from that position was what helped to make it comfortable. He felt half way like a cat in a temporarily deserted kennel.

The bartender, with an inquiring look, edged down toward him.

"Bourbon—and have one yourself," said Cassidy.

"Chaser?" The bartender was reaching back for glasses.

"Naw! I let the women alone." A grin.

A puzzled look, then a laugh. "Oh! You don't want any water."

"Gwan! Somebody musta told yuh," grinned Cassidy. "At that, yuh mighta guessed it yourself. I'll have it straight, thanks."

The bottle was left on the bar. The glasses were emptied, and promptly refilled.

"This is on me," said the bartender. "You're a stranger in town, I take it."

"Yeh, yuh might put it that way. I come down to buy some cows—Herefords—cheap. Tha's the way I want 'em—cheap."

"How cheap?"

"I ain't partic'lar. But they gotta be healthy young stock, and I gotta have a bill of sale along with 'em. Savvy?"

"Sure. Stick around. There ought to be a party show up here bimeby, who'll have what you want."

"That sounds fine. Le's have another shot of this embalmin' juice."

"Listen, Mister, this ain't none of that kind of stuff. Why, I drink it myself. But what I wanted to ask was about the cows you wanted. I take it that you wouldn't be shipping them by rail."

"What difference does it make?"

"Well, you want them cheap. The kind you can't ship by rail is a lot cheaper." A broad wink. The bartender placed both hands on the inner edge of the bar and leaned forward. "I reckon I didn't make any mistake. You show the dust of a lot of distance. You asked for cheap cows. Herefords don't come cheap—*if* you want to send them on the cars!"

Cassidy was enjoying himself. He used a poker face. He appeared so blank that the bartender began to look worried. But, despite his efforts, Cassidy's face cracked into a grin. In an endeavor to cover this he lifted the glass that had been slid across the bar to a convenient point. He drank.

"Just where do you come in on this?" he inquired, trying to look severe.

The bartender had not missed anything. He had watched Cassidy's mouth and eyes. He relaxed. He took up the grin at the point where Cassidy had choked off his own.

"Well, don't worry about me," he said, still grinning, partly in relief, as he reached for a towel and mechanically rubbed it over the bar. "When I put through a deal, I get taken care of, all right. Don't worry about that part of it."

The bartender's gaze suddenly went past Cassidy to the door. "Get out of here, you bum!" he barked. "D'you want me to come and throw you out?"

Cassidy turned. He saw a little wisp of an unshaven, ragged clothed, white haired man of about seventy, who had hesitated in the doorway and was now slowly turning to depart.

"I—I just wanted to buy a drink. I got the money—for one drink," said the little man, over his shoulder. "I reckon I won't spend it here, though. I'll spend it where I'm welcome." He started away.

The bartender laughed coarsely, partly for Cassidy's benefit. But Cassidy, after a week of abstinence, was beginning to feel the few drinks he had taken. "Come here!" he commanded. The little man timidly crossed the room. Cassidy watched him. "You say that you've got the price of only one drink?" he demanded.

"That's all," chirped the other.

"You're in a hell of a fix, ain't yuh?" Cassidy's tone was severe. "Old-timer, yuh can't spend all that money here at one time—not while I'm present!" Cassidy turned. "Mr. Bartender! Kindly pour three liberal hookers. One for me, one for yourself—and one for this gentleman, who I kinda took a likin' to. Step up, old-timer; don't be bashful. You're among friends."

Cassidy's grin and the smile in his eyes usually brought an immediate response. This time, they abjectly failed, as far as an instant response was concerned. The old man stood six or seven feet from the bar. His tired eyes retained their cold, dubious expression for perhaps ten seconds. Then they flickered. Just a momentary change of expression. It might have been a sudden glint of recognition. It was a quick flash in the dull, hopeless eyes, and it passed quicker than it had arrived. Cassidy noticed it; for a moment he idly wondered as to the cause. He attributed it. casually, to a mixture of surprise and appreciation. He felt sorry for the ragged old man. The latter advanced the few steps to the bar, his eyes still watching Cassidy. At Cassidy's prompting, the three drinks were hoisted. The old man's hand trembled as he lifted his glass.

"Say, old-timer," Cassidy inquired a moment later, "yuh et yet? I'm goin' out and throw a li'l grub intuh myself. I hate to eat alone. S'pose yuh come along and show me where we can get the best in town. It's my treat."

"Thank you kindly, sir. I am glad to accept."

"Tha's fine and dandy." Cassidy turned to the bartender. "If that party yuh mentioned happens to show up, tell him about me and say I'll be back after I've et." Cassidy reached down, smilingly grasped the old man's elbow and led him toward the door.

AS THEY faced each other across an oilcloth covered table, Cassidy tried to draw out the old man, to get him to tell something about himself—about his past. But, as Cas-

sidy put it later, "He wouldn't draw worth a darn." The old man stuck to the present; he said that he earned a free cot in the back of a saloon, two-bits each day for a meal and five free drinks per diem for swamping out the saloon early every morning. Between drinks—and the two bits a day for a meal—he did the best he could. This much he was willing to admit. Between the present and his past an impenetrable wall had been built. Cassidy was curious, very. He ventured several leading questions, but they fell like dead arrows blunted against the wall. The old man's polite evasiveness made Cassidy feel vaguely foolish. And all the time, the weary eyes searched Cassidy's as though seeking something. The intent blank gaze began to get on Cassidy's nerves, and when the meal was finished he was glad that the old man appeared willing to go on about his own business.

Cassidy watched him shuffle off down the row of connected front porches that served as a sidewalk on that side of the street. In the old man's pocket was a silver dollar that Cassidy had given him.

"Uh! He reminds me of a ghost—or something," said Cassidy to himself, as he hastened back toward the Socorro.

He found the bartender conversing with a young Mexican, who was the last word in being a dude of the range—that is, of the range south of the border. Black velvet was the material of the short jacket and the tight-at-the-thighs, bell bottomed trousers. Both garments were adorned with fringes of silver lace and ornaments beaten out of silver. There were tassels and an ornamented band on the very high peaked black hat. And the broad silk sash around his waist held colors that fairly shrieked. Cassidy grinned at the wide splotch of dust on the back of the Mexican's jacket. The gaudy one had dusted himself off, but had missed one place. It marred the picture.

As Cassidy crossed the room, the bartender said something to the Mexican that caused the latter to turn away from the bar. Cassidy saw that he was a handsome young fellow, not over twenty-two or three, at the most. The bartender hastened to introduce them to each other. The Mexican's name was Domingo Gallo. Cassidy strangled a grin, for the name, liberally translated, meant Sunday Chicken. Cassidy wondered if this young dandy was a relative of Jesus Gallo, who had now served six years of an eighteen-year sentence.

"You two gents might be able to do business," the bartender added. "S'pose you slip into the back room, where you can talk private."

Gallo led the way. He stopped at the door to strike a match before entering the back room. He lifted the chimney and touched the lighted match to the wick of a hanging lamp. He walked back to close the door, then seated himself in one of the chairs around a circular table. He placed his elbows on the green clothed top and leaned across the table toward Cassidy, who had dropped into a chair.

"I am informed that you invited Ezra Skinner to have supper with you," he said abruptly, in crisp words without a trace of accent.

"Well, what of it? Did I break any law in doin' that?" Cassidy's grin appeared to be a bit disconcerting to Gallo. But there was a peculiar glitter in the latter's dark eyes. Cassidy grew cautious. Mechanically he maintained the grin. but he thought swiftly, "Gallo? Skinner? Gallo? Gallo? Gallo—that was the name of the man who had been sentenced to eighteen years. He was lucky; he should have been hanged. I betcha this kid—he's got the same name—Gallo—" Thus ran Cassidy's thoughts.

"No, you broke no law, Mr. Cassidy; but this old Skinner is apt to tell lies. You don't want to believe him. You know that old men tell things that they only imagine. They are apt to be very garrulous."

"Well, he didn't 'garrul' worth a darn to me," said Cassidy. "I can get just as much information out of an armadillo, any day."

"Oh, so you sought information?" Suspicion registered strong on Gallo's unlined face. Cassidy read it easily.

"Sure, I did," Cassidy replied. "I'm tryin' to buy some good cows—cheap. And I'm sure tryin' to get information about where I can get 'em."

Gallo's face relaxed.

"And what I want to know," Cassidy continued, "is where yuh learned to talk American better than I can. I thought yuh come from below."

"Oh, that—" Young Gallo appeared

to be pleased at the compliment. "You see, my father caught me young and sent me to a boarding school in Illinois. I returned less than six years ago."

"I see." Cassidy nodded thoughtfully. Less than six years? It began to appear likely that this young fellow was the son of Jesus Gallo, the rustler and murderer.

"And the name Cassidy is familiar to me," Gallo went on, his gaze intent on the other man. "Is this your first visit to Tres Pecos?" Cassidy noticed the same peculiar momentary glitter in Gallo's eyes.

"Well, you can say that I'm a stranger here. Yuh see, I got a ranch a coupla hundred miles north. I'm trying to improve my stock. I want some of these Herefords—young cows. I kep' a-tryin' to get 'em cheap all along the way. I couldn't get 'em cheap enough, and I finally showed up here. Le's get down to business. Yuh got any Herefords—cheap?"

"What do you call cheap?"

"Twenty-five a head. I got a thousand dollars, and I got my heart set on gettin' forty cows for that."

"You are going to drive them north to your ranch—immediately?"

"I sure am, if I get 'em."

"Very well, Mr. Cassidy. In three days I will deliver to you here forty young Hereford cows. For one thousand dollars cash."

"Tha's fine. I'll go along and help yuh drive 'em up here."

"That will not be necessary. In fact, it will be impossible. I will not be allowed to take an American to the place I am going to obtain the cows. You know, Mr. Cassidy, how some of my countrymen feel about all Americans."

"Sure. They don't like us none. You just trot along and get them Herefords. Say, what brand are they?"

"The Scorpion."

"Registered?"

"No, it is a Mexican brand."

"Oh!" Cassidy grinned as he mentally visualized a large sprawling hieroglyphic that covered a lot of hide, and also a lot of sins. "Well, I gotta have a bill of sale along with 'em; remember that."

"Surely—and I will send two of my men to help you drive them north from here."

"Tha's fine. In three days, you say?"

"Yes. They will be delivered to you in the corral at the western end of the town. You may look them over—and then pay me the thousand dollars in cash."

"Have your bill of sale ready. If them cows are what I want, you'll get the cash on the nail. I'll have it ready."

DURING the next two hours, Cassidy visited in turn several other saloons. He met many men whom he had known before, when he had worked for the C-Bar-4. Some of them were glad to see him, some greeted him with distant politeness and reserve, others had looked him over and had then turned away as though they had failed to recognize him. At first, he had expected trouble and had been keeping himself at high tension, ready for it. He had not wanted trouble, but after a flock of drinks he began vaguely to resent the fact that he had found none. And after a few more drinks he began to feel quite at home and quite at his ease in Tres Pecos.

Then he again met Ezra Skinner. The old man confronted him as he stepped from a saloon into the semi-darkness outside the faint glow coming through the open door from the oil lamps within. He led Cassidy to a darker spot.

"Have yuh got another dollar for me?" he whispered.

Cassidy felt generous. "I might some day have one, at that. What did yuh do with all that money I gave yuh? I thought it would last yuh a week."

"Well, workin' for yuh—like I been doin'—comes high. The dollar's gone."

"Workin' for me? Gosh! Yuh better tell me when you're gonna start a job like that. You'll ruin me yet, a-spendin' money reckless like that." Cassidy grinned. "If yuh was workin' for me, yuh better tell me how much work yuh done—and what the hell *was* the work, outside of spendin' the dollar?"

"Well, I was watchin'—through the door from across the street. I saw yuh go intuh that back room with Domingo Gallo. Says I to myself, 'Cassidy don't know who that young feller is.' I do. I know who he is and what he is. *He's Jesus Gallo's son!*"

"Yeh! I sorta half way made a guess at that," said Cassidy. "Nice boy, ain't he?" A grin.

"D'yuh think so? If yuh do, yuh're a danged fool!" The old man snorted contemptuously. "That baby faced lad is a wildcat on wheels, and plumb filled with a sidewinder's poison. He was away to school when his old man got sent to the pen. He come back right afterwards. It don't take this kid no time to take a-holt of things. He starts in right where his old man leaves off. He's got more brains than his dad ever thought of havin'. The kid is *tough!* He don't wear no gun—in sight. He carries it in a slick contraption under his left armpit. I figger that's one of the reasons he wears that short open jacket—so's he can git to his gun. He can beat his old man or you or anybody else in town when it comes to a fast draw and quick shootin'."

"Thasso? Kinda lucky for me, ain't it, that he doesn't know I'm the hombre who sent his dad to jail?"

"Yuh jest think he don't know. Maybe he didn't—at first. But I been trailin' him around. That's where your dollar went. I had to buy me a drink once in a while as an excuse to be near him. I'd keep my back to him—wasn't payin' no attention to him nohow, after I'd slid in quietly up to a bar where he was. And d'yuh know what he did finally? He grabbed me by the neck and threw me out of a saloon. It hurts yet, where he kicked me. He musta seen me two-three times when I didn't think he was payin' any attention. He's awful slick."

"My gosh!" said Cassidy. "What was the idea of this trailin' him around and invitin' yourself to a swift kick? You oughta follow my example. I never go out invitin' trouble like that."

Cassidy's tone was perfectly serious. Perhaps he believed himself. But Ezra Skinner didn't. He laughed—a dry, throaty *"Heh-heh!"* And his own laugh appeared to alarm him. He led Cassidy farther away and continued in an even lower whisper, "I reckon the kid didn't know who you was, at first. But he sure knows now. I heard at least eight-ten men tell him. Everybody who ever saw yuh remembers yuh. I did. The last time yuh was in this town yuh raised enough hell to make 'em remember yuh forever. Young Gallo knows yuh're the man who sent his father up for eighteen years. And what I can't figger is that he has announced *that he will shoot any man who picks trouble with yuh or who shoots yuh!"* Ezra Skinner's whisper grew very husky and throaty. "Mr. Cassidy, I can't figger it!"

"Neither can I—and I ain't goin' to try. Maybe there's a catch in it; but I ain't worryin' none till it shows up. All I want is forty good heifers or cows. I gotta wait three days for them, so le's go have a drink to help make the waitin' easier."

"Do I git the dollar?" the old man inquired hopefully.

"Sure. Here it is. But be careful of it. Yuh musta had a misspent youth, the way yuh spend money recklessly now on drinks for yourself. I see that I gotta reform yuh by keepin' yuh from spendin' any money as long as you're with me." Cassidy grinned broadly, as he followed the old man up the street to another saloon.

Chapter III

DRUGGED

THREE days passed. It was late in the afternoon, almost dusk, when the forty cows that had been smuggled up from south of the line were delivered to Cassidy in the corral. He looked them over carefully. They were sound young stock, the kind he had been looking for. He sized them up as being one large sized bargain, and cheerfully paid over one thousand dollars in cash in exchange for a bill of sale. As for the Scorpion brand? Cassidy figured that a Mexican brand was a Mexican brand. The sooner he got the cows out of town the better. When they were turned loose in the Los Alamos Valley, everything would be lovely.

But it was too late to make a start that evening. Besides, as Domingo Gallo pointed out, the two vaqueros were tired and would appreciate a night's sleep before starting out with Cassidy on the journey north. So Cassidy planned to head out of town with his cows at the first hint of dawn.

Now it must be set down that Cassidy was not quite the foolish person that several people thought him to be. Having been warned, he carefully watched young Gallo. But the Mexican appeared to be friendly. Cassidy could discover nothing to arouse suspicion. The bill of sale was airtight; the cows

were all he had hoped they would be. But, nevertheless, after tucking the bill of sale into a pocket of the money belt, and before going to take another drink, he hired two young out-of-a-job American cowboys to stand guard during the night on the forty cows in the corral. He promised them big pay—three dollars each—if the cows were still there when he showed up in the morning. Next, he wrote to Shorthand Conway a short letter in which he set down some facts and some suspicions. He also outlined his proposed route north with the cows and gave the date on which he expected to arrive with them in the Los Alamos.

After dropping this letter in the post office slot, he went into the Socorro Saloon. Domingo Gallo stood with one elbow on the bar. He appeared to be half drunk, but very, very friendly, as he turned his head, saw Cassidy and motioned with his free hand for Cassidy to join him. Cassidy ordered Bourbon. He tossed the drink down his throat, and immediately afterward began to wonder at the queer aftertaste. Wonder changed quickly to suspicion. Things began to get a little hazy. Cassidy backed into the corner of the wall and the bar; his hand dropped to his gun butt. He made a gigantic mental effort to overcome the black cloud that gathered in front of his eyes. And that was all he remembered.

He awakened on a hard plank floor. His first blinking wonder was why he had such a splitting headache. His eyes hurt; the lids felt too tight on swollen eyeballs. He had a terrible thirst; he felt sick. He managed to sit up, supporting himself by one hand. Dimly, as he blinked around at the walls, he began to realize that he was in jail. The one window set with stout iron bars told him that, And he was the only prisoner.

The jail in Tres Pecos was nothing more or less than a wooden box. Floor, ceiling and walls of the one room were made of the same material—two-inch-thick oak planks crisscrossed on each other to make walls four inches thick. And it was the boast of the builders that two hundred pounds of spikes had been used in the construction. Each spike had been driven clear through the planks and the end bent over into the wood on the inside of the room. Years and years had dried the wood almost to the hardness of flint. Some of the planks had tried to split, but the multitude of spikes had held them together. The heavy door was hung on massive hand wrought hinges, and was secured on the outside by a huge padlock, which connected two large eyebolts that had been made from iron or steel rods as thick as a man's thumb. The padlock, six inches across and built throughout in proportion, had been, and was, a source of pride and grief. Many a frisky cowboy had snapped a riata or a cincha when, as a whisky inspired joke, he had hitched on with his rope and attempted to gallop away with the lock. One attempt had always been enough; after that, the sadder and wiser cowboy was always willing to encourage some stranger to try it.

Cassidy had viewed the jail from the outside. And now, after his painful awakening, he was getting a good look at the interior. He failed to like it. And he began to wonder as to just why he was there. He remembered that queer aftertaste of the whisky, and that was about all. Vaguely, he suspected that he had been drugged. But he could not figure out a reason. It hurt his head, anyway, when he tried to think. He gave it up and turned to the olla of water that was suspended by sisal cords from a hook in the ceiling. As he alternated drinking with splashing some of the water over his head, he heard the whistle of a train.

A BIT unsteadily he walked over to the window and supported himself by grasping the bars as he gazed out. By the height of the sun and the shortness of the shadows he judged that it was nearly noon. He saw the train come to a squealing halt. A man with a small handbag stepped briskly down and looked inquiringly around. The stranger apparently decided his course by the signs he read. He walked across the hot and dusty plaza and disappeared through the doorway of the Plaza Hotel. Cassidy grinned; he could not help it, as he wondered how the vermin in the beds would welcome the dapper stranger. Part of one night in a bed at the Plaza had been enough for Cassidy. He had finished the night in the hayloft of the livery stable.

Cassidy had another drink of water.

He felt a little better. "Golly! I musta been awful drunk," he decided. "But Tres Pecos musta got awful reformed if they stick a man in jail for that. I prob'ly done somethin' that I don't remember doin'."

Thus he cogitated as he searched his pockets. His cartridge belt and Colt, of course, had been taken away, but he began to feel even more helpless when he discovered that the small coins that he habitually stowed away in various pockets, had been removed. Even a book of wheatstraw papers and a bag of tobacco had been taken. In sudden alarm he investigated to see if his money belt was still wrapped around his waist. It was. And he breathed a little easier when he felt the crackle of paper in one of the compartments. He pulled out his shirt and unsnapped a pocket of the belt. He saw the folded white paper. He tucked his shirt back and took another breath of relief. His bill of sale was safe.

Chapter IV

RAILROADED

A FEW minutes later, the big padlock unsnapped with a loud click. The door swung open, revealing the town marshal, Colt in hand. He had a strong jaw, weak eyes and a red nose.

"Come on to court!" he ordered.

"Sure," said Cassidy. "Say, what was I arrested for?"

"Wait and find out from Judge Gonzales. Anything you say now will be used against you."

"The hell it will! Who took my money?"

"I did. It's safe."

"I'm glad to hear it. S'pose you buy us both a drink with some of my money?"

"No! You're goin' to court *pronto.*"

"Not without a drink, I ain't! Looky here, Mister, I'm askin' yuh for your own good: have yuh ever studied the Constitution of the United States? Have yuh ever studied it *carefully?* Have yuh?"

"Well—uh—not recent, but——"

"My gosh, man! And yuh take chances like that? Yuh don't know the risk yuh're runnin'."

"Chop the talk and come along!" peremptorily.

"Not till I've warned yuh that I'm standin' on my rights as a citizen. Yuh know what that means, accordin' to the Constitution. First thing yuh know, yuh'll have old Uncle Sam comin' down on yuh like a rock slide. I'd sure hate to take chances on plumb ignorance, like you do. Why, I betchuh don't even know the penalty you're facin' for actin' like that. Uh-uh! Yuh sure don't!" Cassidy shook his head sorrowfully. The sorrow was genuine. He felt sorry for himself, not the marshal.

"What in the devil are yuh ravin' about?" the marshal demanded, vaguely alarmed.

"Why, my constitutional rights; that's what! Here I am, a sick man—awful sick! I need a drink to help me drag one totterin' footstep after the other. My constitution is in awful shape. I need medicine. And through plumb ignorance yuh deny it to me. You don't look so well yourself. I'm prescribing the same medicine for you."

The officer grinned feebly. "Oh, well, since it's your money that's gonna buy the medicine—" He stood aside, to avoid Cassidy's rush for the open. "Hey! Come back here!" he yelled.

"Come back, nawthin'!" yelped Cassidy. "It's your duty to keep up with me." Cassidy kept on toward the nearest saloon.

The officer was torn between laughter and a feeling that Cassidy was making a fool of him. He instinctively and hastily followed his prisoner, leaving the jail door wide open and the huge padlock dangling from one of the eyebolts.

The marshal was fifteen minutes late in delivering his prisoner at the courtroom, and it was evident that the officer was now in no danger of losing the blush on his nose. He and Cassidy wandered in arm in arm.

"Prisoner at the bar," the magistrate began. He stopped to clear his throat. He gazed frowningly at Cassidy from behind the unpainted table that served as a desk.

"I was a prisoner at the bar a few minutes ago," Cassidy took advantage of the brief pause to interpolate. "If this is a bar I'll have another shot of Bourbon. Have one yourself. I'm buying."

"Silence, sir!" barked the justice, amid snickers from the spectators.

"This court permits no levity."

"Yuh got any rye, then?" said Cassidy. "I ain't partic'lar."

This was too much even for the magistrate, whose frown skidded momentarily. "You are charged with grand larceny—to wit, with the theft of forty cows," he continued, after managing to screw his frown back into place.

"Well, the price I paid for them was almost a steal, at that," admitted Cassidy, grinning. "I sure got a bargain. Where's the hombre who says I didn't buy 'em honest?" To reassure himself, Cassidy, who was standing in a nonchalant attitude, with one thumb hooked into his waistband, crackled the paper in his money belt. He looked inquiringly around.

A few more of the citizens who were at leisure had sifted into the courtroom. And now a group of ten or twelve men stopped outside. Among them, Cassidy saw Domingo Gallo and the bartender from the Socorro. Gallo was talking low and hurriedly, gesticulating emphatically with his hands. The group broke up, the men filing one by one through the door. Most of them found seats on the benches in the rear of the room. Young Gallo and the bartender walked past the benches to a point within a few feet of the magistrate.

"Here is the Territorial witness, now," said the judge.

But Cassidy paid no heed. He was still standing, and from this position his height enabled him to look through a front window and across the plaza. What interested him was the sight of old Ezra Skinner in a brief conversation with the dapper stranger who had recently alighted from the train. Skinner had stopped the stranger as the latter had stepped out of the Plaza Hotel. The stranger nodded, finally, and then started briskly toward the courtroom. Ezra Skinner disappeared, heading west out of Cassidy's range of vision.

ANOTHER man had joined Gallo and the bartender. Cassidy vaguely realized that this third man was a lawyer, or something. Anyway, Cassidy failed to like him, for he was using a lot of words in complaining or stating that forty cows had been stolen from Domingo Gallo, that these same cows, bearing the Scorpion brand, were now confined at the western end of town, and that one Cassidy, who had stolen them had claimed to be the owner.

Midway of this recital, the dapper stranger had entered the courtroom. Quietly, he had walked down the aisle and taken a position near Cassidy. In his hand was a small leather case. He waited until the speaker had finished. Then he stepped up to the table.

"Your honor," he began, "I am here to represent the defendant. I present my apologies to the court for arriving late, and humbly request that the first part of the complaint, which I unfortunately missed, be set forth again."

"Who the hell are you?" Judge Gonzales demanded abruptly.

The stranger laid a printed card upon the table. Gonzales picked it up. "William Rooney, Attorney and Counselor at Law," he read aloud, almost sneeringly. He dropped the card as though it were red hot. There was a queer, puzzled look on his face. He glanced at Domingo Gallo as though appealing for advice. Gallo frowned, that was all. Simultaneously, as Cassidy noted, the attorney almost imperceptibly shook his head.

"Lemme see your credentials," said the judge, glaring at Rooney.

"Certainly, your honor." Rooney advanced a few steps, opened his brief case and laid several documents on the table.

Gonzales examined them. "Did the defendant send for you?" he inquired.

"Not exactly, your honor. But I am here to represent him."

"Who sent you?"

"Last night, your honor, I received a telegram from the secretary of the Southwestern Cattleman's Association." Rooney's face was perfectly sober. But, nevertheless, in its expression was an indefinable something—a something that seemed to say, (to use modern slang) "Laugh that off!"

"And is the defendant a member of the association?" The judge, plainly, was sparring for time.

"Not yet, your honor. But his name has been proposed."

"Oh!" said Gonzales, in a peculiar tone.

"Uh!" said Cassidy to himself, grinning. "That sure is news to me."

"And, if your honor please," continued Rooney, "will the order be given

for the complaint to be recited or read again?"

"It will not!" Gonzales was emphatic.

And then Rooney started a speech. He began in a half explanatory, half apologetic way; he dropped back several hundreds of years into the history of law. It took him half an hour to get back to the present day. Cassidy, and possibly some of the others, gained the impression that Rooney was talking against time—or to kill time. Rooney looked at his watch, then dropped back to the Roman era and its laws. His speech had nothing to do with Cassidy's case, as far as the latter could see, but it was interesting as a thesis on ancient history. Another half hour passed.

Judge Gonzales began to look bored. He yawned. "Just a moment, Mr. Rooney," he interrupted finally. "Will you kindly inform the court as to the reason for this marvelous flow of words?"

Rooney again pulled out his watch. He looked at it. "Certainly, your honor," he replied. "It was my intention, if the court would permit, to define the exact rights of the defendant, according to law. I hadn't finished——"

"Well, this is only a preliminary hearing, Mr. Rooney, to determine whether or not the defendant shall be held for trial before the district judge. I suggest that you save your oratory for the higher court. What we want here is evidence on which to hold and bind over the defendant, if, in my judgment, there is sufficient reason, cause and evidence to hold him."

"Exactly, your honor," Rooney purred smoothly. "And may I suggest, with the permission of the court, that the evidence in the case be shown?"

"Certainly, Mr. Rooney. It is the desire of the court to expedite this preliminary hearing. We shall now adjourn to the corral to view the cows that are being held as evidence. Afterwards, we shall hear the evidence of the witnesses who are waiting to testify as to the guilt of the defendant."

"How about witnesses who will testify for the defendant?" was Rooney's query. He turned to look at Cassidy, with a reassuring smile.

"As the defendant's attorney, it will be up to you to produce them in court," was Gonzales' smooth reply. "Already, Mr. Rooney, you have succeeded in wasting too much of the court's valuable time."

"Hey, Judge," Cassidy blurted out, "let me get the straight of this. Am I s'posed to have stole them forty cows that's in the corral next to the red barn —down there?" Cassidy pointed west.

"That is the crime that you are accused of."

"Forty Scorpion cows?" Cassidy persisted.

"They are so described.

"And this 'Sunday Chicken' hombre says I stole 'em?"

Cassidy was serious, but there was a scattered burst of laughter from the spectators.

"Mr. Domingo Gallo is the complainant."

"Well, I dunno what's it's all about, but this Sunday Chicken lad oughtn't to drink so much after he's et a mess of dried apples—or somethin' like that. Why, Judge, right here I got a bill of sale from that man for them same forty Scorpion cows!" Cassidy pulled up his shirt from his waistband, fumbled for a moment with his fingers in a compartment of the money belt, and then triumphantly drew out a folded piece of white paper. With a flourish, he opened the creases. He looked almost as though he doubted his eyes as he stared at one side of the paper. He turned it over hastily. His mouth opened slightly. A dazed look crept into his eyes. The paper was blank on both sides.

Counselor Rooney had edged up to assist his client in looking at the paper. He took it from Cassidy's almost limp fingers. "I—I don't—quite savvy this," Cassidy stammered.

"Never mind. I do," said Rooney. He turned to the judge. "I have been informed reliably, your honor, that late yesterday Mr. Cassidy paid one thousand dollars in cash to the accusing witness, Mr. Domingo Gallo, for these same forty cows, bearing the Scorpion brand, which Mr. Cassidy is now accused of having stolen. To complete the transaction my client received a bill of sale. I am informed that while my client was in a state of unconsciousness, induced by a drug given him in a drink of whisky, this bill of sale was removed from his person. And, while still unconscious, he was then thrown into the local jail. This whole thing, your honor, is a plot against the defendant. Further-

more, it is not even a good plot. My client is accused of having stolen forty cows bearing a brand known as the Scorpion. These cows have not yet been shown to the court as evidence. And, unless they are produced, there is no case against my client."

The judge appeared to be slightly disconcerted at Rooney's knowledge concerning the bill of sale that had been taken from Cassidy. Gallo's attorney stepped forward.

"Counselor Rooney no doubt has witnesses to back up his remarkable statement in regard to a plot against the defendant."

"I can't produce witnesses now," smiled Rooney. "And I won't need them. I repeat that there is no case against my client. No evidence has been shown."

"Oh! If that's all that's bothering you—" A shrug of the other attorney's shoulders. He turned to the judge. "Will the court," he requested, "order an adjournment to the red barn corral in order that the evidence be viewed and this case be allowed to progress without any more delaying speeches from the windy, wordy and eminent gentleman of law who has honored Tres Pecos with his presence?" Sarcasm dripped heavily from every word.

But the windy, wordy and eminent visiting attorney only turned with a wide grin and dropped an eyelid slowly as he met Cassidy's questioning gaze.

And when, some ten minutes later, the parade reached the corral, the reason for Bill Rooney's heavy wink became apparent to Cassidy. Also the reason for Rooney's taking so much time in expounding the history of ancient laws. That is, Cassidy thought he saw and knew the reason; but much of it was still a mystery to him. There *had* been forty cows in the red barn corral! Now there were none! In fact, there was not a cow in sight anywhere. And whoever had hazed the cows beyond the horizon or over the hills had also possessed a sense of humor, for the gate from an adjoining enclosure had been opened, and about two hundred sheep now occupied the red barn corral.

There was much excited discussion—much of it highly tinged with profanity. Mr. William Rooney was the only man among those present who did not appear to be surprised. Mr. Rooney had taken one look, and had immediately become the possessor of one large grin. Cassidy still did not know what had happened. He had lost the bill of sale, had lost the cows, had lost his money, and was painfully wondering how he would be able to square himself with Shorthand Conway.

"Would the court be willing to convene right here, for about one minute?" Mr. Rooney inquired sweetly.

"Why?" Judge Gonzales inquired, his gaze going toward Domingo Gallo, who had drawn aside for a whispered conference with the attorney who had represented the prosecution in the courtroom.

"Because," said Rooney, raising his voice, "there is no evidence and therefore no case against my client."

"Is that so?" Judge Gonzales frowned. "It happens, Mr. Rooney, that at an early hour this morning, I, with perhaps a dozen witnesses, saw the forty cows that were in this corral. It is very apparent now that you came to Tres Pecos for the sole purpose of obstructing justice. My opinion is that you are guilty of contempt of court. On this charge, I am sentencing you to sixty days in the local jail—which will be sufficient to hold you until more serious charges can be preferred."

"If your honor please," said Rooney, "may I call attention to the fact that I arrived on the last train, that I went directly from the train to the Plaza Hotel, and from the hotel to the courtroom, and that it would have been impossible for me to have conspired to obstruct justice, as you put it. Will the court please consider these facts?"

"Yes, Mr. Rooney. The court does."

"Ah! And it recognizes that a mistake has been made?"

"Yes, Mr. Rooney, after considering the pointless speech with which you detained us in the courtroom while the evidence was being removed from this corral by your confederates, I am of the opinion that a mistake has been made. I sentenced you to sixty days. That was wrong. The sentence will be six months."

Mr. Rooney lost even the slightest semblance of a grin. "I request that bail be set."

"There will be no bail."

"But, your honor, you can't do that."

"I've done it. That's final. You can't come down here and highhand us."

"My God!" Rooney blurted out helplessly, desperately. "Don't you know *anything* about law?"

"Sufficient to know what to do with you. I've read up a little on law."

"Well, it must have been on the last page of an almanac. And I'll probably be sentenced three years for saying that."

"Maybe you will, at that," said Gonzales heavily. "I'll have to look it up. Marshal Hogan, remove the prisoners to the carcel."

"Your honor! I demand that bail be set in my case! I am going to appeal."

"Go ahead—if you can."

This was too much even for the other attorney. "Judge, may I call to your attention that there is only one unbailable offense? Don't allow your anger to overcome your usually sound judgment. This man Rooney is entirely within his rights in demanding that bail be set."

"*You* shut up! I know what I'm doing. There was a murder committed last week at Dos Palos. I can hold this man without bail as a suspect."

There were smiles all around, with the exception of Judge Gonzales, Rooney and Cassidy. The judge continued to frown. Cassidy looked worried. Rooney appeared to be slightly dazed.

Rooney seemed to recover. "Your honor," he requested humbly, "may I send a telegram?"

"I don't know. I'll have to look that up, to be sure of my ground. I'm very busy these days; I'll let you know about it next week. Marshal Hogan," Gonzales ordered, "do not allow this prisoner to communicate with anyone, until you receive an order from me! And you"—turning to Domingo Gallo—"had better be recovering the evidence."

"The forty cows?" inquired Rooney.

"The same."

"But—but—" Rooney stammered.

"You shut up!" Gonzales barked out. "Marshal Hogan, you will proceed immediately to the lockup with the prisoners."

"Git along, li'l prisoners, git along," Hogan ordered, Colt in hand. He waved the gun toward the jail. "Move or be dragged," he added.

Cassidy turned and started peaceably. Not so with Rooney, who was more than a little angry. He stood his ground and argued loudly.

"I'm calling on all you men as witnesses," he declaimed. "This is an outrage, a travesty on justice. I call upon you to remember every word I've spoken."

"That'd sure be a big job," was the jeering interruption from the bartender of the Socorro.

"In no sense of the word have I been guilty of contempt of court," continued Rooney. "There isn't a court in the country in which this malicious, ridiculous, trumped-up charge would stand. It would be thrown out. And there is no ground on which to hold my client. There isn't even a shred of evidence. Why, there's——"

Rooney's flow of words ceased abruptly as the marshal laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, whirled him around and pushed him toward the jail.

"Come on. What's the use of talking?" said Cassidy. "The first thing yuh know, this judge'll look up some more things in his book. Then yuh never will get out of jail. I don't like the look in his eye. I betchuh he wasn't lyin' a bit; maybe he *can* read, at that. He doesn't look it, but yuh never can tell about these mean and crazy hombres." Cassidy grinned as he kept edging away from the marshal. "Do like I'm doin'," Cassidy continued, "don't go to antagonizin' the marshal. He's only doin' his duty. Help tuh make it easier for him. Go to jail peaceable."

But Rooney was almost frothing at the mouth as he struggled in the marshal's heavy grasp. Cassidy hastened back. He seized Rooney from behind and held his arms. "Listen!" he yelped. "Be good! Words ain't gonna help yuh right now, and action is only gonna get you a slap on the head from that Colt. I'm tryin' to keep yuh together in one piece. Savvy? I may need yuh later."

Marshal Hogan had stepped back. He grinned as he fell in line behind Cassidy as the latter marched his own attorney off to the jail. Cassidy kept talking to Rooney, who finally quieted down. They walked around a corner of the jail and up to the front door.

And right then and there the marshal lost his grin. He stared almost unbelievingly. Frantically he searched around. He began to curse. The huge padlock, which had been hanging open

from one of the eyebolts, was missing. During the session at the corral, someone, perhaps some cowboy, who had seen the opportunity of a lifetime, had stolen the biggest and strongest padlock in the whole Southwest!

Chapter V

A Mischievous Ghost

CASSIDY sat down on the dirty mattress in one corner of the jail and grinned at his attorney, who paced the floor with short, jerky steps.

"Golly! Yuh sure are a wonder," said Cassidy. "How did yuh manage to steal that padlock?"

"I didn't."

"Ne'mind that; they'll probably hang the deadwood on yuh for doin' it, anyway. I betchuh that right now they can produce a dozen witnesses who saw yuh steal it. It was a nice lock, too. Musta weighed six-eight pounds. 'S too bad it's gone. I can think up a lotta good uses for a lock like that. F'rinstance, I'd like to try to bend it over the head of that judge."

The idea seemed to please Rooney. He smiled faintly. "Entirely admirable—entirely. But if it could be done, I would like to have the first chance."

"Maybe you'd be entitled to it, at that," grinned Cassidy. "Come here and sit down, so's we can whisper. I wanta know who hazed them cows outa the corral. I paid a thousand bucks for them cows. And they stole my bill of sale. I'm sure in trouble. Gosh, if I ain't got no receipt or nawthin' a-tall to show, I betchuh my pardner'll think that I went and played poker with the cow money. He don't think much of my poker playin'—he says I'm a rotten poker player. He——"

"Whoa! Back up!" said Rooney, sitting down. "This is no time to worry about little things. You do not seem to realize what faces you."

"The hell I don't! Dawggone! You don't know my pardner like I do."

Rooney leaned near and started to whisper. This caution had been advised by Cassidy because a Mexican guard—one of Domingo Gallo's vaqueros—sat outside the door, which had been fastened temporarily with a piece of wire. Marshal Hogan was scouring the town in an endeavor to find a padlock big enough to snap over the two eyebolts.

"You don't seem to realize that they're trying to railroad you to the penitentiary," Rooney whispered.

"Well, I dunno but what I'd rather go there than try to face Conway, without havin' the cows or the money to show him." Cassidy looked mournful. "What's the big scheme back of them stealin' my bill of sale?"

"Domingo Gallo is the whole scheme, so Ezra Skinner tells me. The Gallo family and their money just about run Tres Pecos; they own most of it. Domingo owns the Socorro Saloon. That fat, halfbreed judge is Domingo's cousin. That attorney is another cousin. You were responsible for sending Domingo's father to the pen—where he should have been sent long before you first showed up around here. And now Domingo wants revenge. Killing you would be too simple. Domingo wants to put you in jail, as a cattle thief. That's his idea of a fitting revenge. He can produce any number of perjuring witnesses. If he told them to, they would get up and swear that they saw you shoot President Garfield."

"Maybe," said Cassidy. "But what I wanta know is who stole that big padlock."

"Old Skinner must be guilty of that. But I can't see where that vandalism is going to help us any."

"Uh! Is he the hombre who engineered hazin' them cows outa the corral?"

"Yes," smiled Rooney, "undoubtedly. He told me to hold everybody in the courtroom for an hour, to give him an opportunity to remove the evidence. He is the man who told me of Gallo's plot against you."

"How'd you happen to be sent down here?" inquired Cassidy.

"Ezra Skinner again. Last night, after you had been drugged, he sent an innocent reading little message by telegraph. The message congratulated a friend about his supposed recent marriage. But that message was a code. It meant something else; it was the cause of my being routed out of bed to catch a train."

"Say," Cassidy blurted out, "who *is* this——?"

"Not so loud!" Rooney hastened to interrupt. "Old man Skinner is one of the smartest detectives on our staff."

"Oh, golly!" gasped Cassidy. "I thought he was just an old barfly."

"That shows how smart he is. I'll bet he took the part well."

"He sure did. Gosh, how he fooled me. Why, he gets a bed by swampin' out a saloon, and he goes around tryin' to cadge free drinks." Cassidy grinned in a puzzled way as he removed his hat and scratched his head. "I pass. He sure fooled me. How long has he been in this detectin' business?"

"Something over six years. He used to have a cattle ranch south of here. The Gallo family—old Jesus Gallo was the head of it then—ruined Skinner. They stole his cattle right and left. They bought up a bank mortgage and finally foreclosed on his land. Before that, there was a raid on Skinner's ranchhouse. His wife was killed; his son got raked across the eyes and blinded by a bullet. Skinner was all shot up and left for dead."

"Yeh, I remember now that I heard about that," said Cassidy. "But I never connected it up before."

"And when Skinner got out of the hospital—they'd taken him clear to El Paso to try to patch him up—he wasn't the man he'd been before. They used to call him 'Smiling Ez.' He'd lost his smile forever; his hair had turned white. He's only fifty-three right now. You'd think he was seventy-five, by his looks. We gave him a job, and he's been a most valuable man. He uses his pay to support his blind son in luxury. He's got a terrific hate against rustlers. He's as cunning as a fox in getting evidence against them. He is almost childish minded at times; some people think he is as crazy as a bedbug. Maybe he is—but we'd like to have a few more men who are crazy like Skinner is." Rooney paused.

"How'd he come to be sent down here?" Cassidy inquired.

"Well, there had been complaints from this section. There was much suspicion against young Domingo Gallo, but no evidence. Skinner wanted to come to Tres Pecos. He pointed out that with his white hair and changed appearance in general, nobody would recognize him. Apparently no one has. He came into town on a freight train, dressed like an old bum. He has posed as one ever since. He says that nobody pays much attention to him; that he can sift around and overhear a few words here and a few words there, and piece them together. He sends in a weekly report, and from his suspicions we finally decided to effect a change of stock inspectors. We sent a reliable man down here, with the result that no more blotted cattle can be shipped from Tres Pecos by rail. There have been very few complaints lately. Without a doubt, young Domingo Gallo is the brains of the crooked gang. We know it, but can't prove it—yet. You helped to clean up this section a few years ago. It was a good job. But in the last year or two, Tres Pecos has again become the headquarters for a lot of dirty work at the crossroads. East, south and west, stock has been stolen. The stealings used to be now and then. Right now the thefts seem to be in a continuous string. And every missing beef is hazed down south of the border, which makes us helpless."

"Huh!" Cassidy arose and walked over to the suspended water jar. "Hey, you, out there!" he yelled toward the door, "ask Hogan when he's gonna feed us!"

Cassidy placed his hands on the olla, to tilt it down so that he could drink. Momentarily he seemed to freeze, as one hand encountered something that had been hung behind the earthenware jar. He looked toward the door, then from the meshes of the sisal net in which the olla was hanging he drew forth one large, long barreled Colt revolver.

"Oh, gosh!" he whispered almost unbelievingly to Rooney. "This is *my own gun!*" He peered into the cylinder to make sure that it was loaded. "Now what and how——?"

"Ezra Skinner again," said Rooney, grinning. "I know why that gun is there, and what he hopes you will do. He probably stole it out of the marshal's office while everybody was in the courtroom. That's Ezra Skinner, every time. The people who think he is crazy are probably right. He's always doing things like making those cows disappear from the corral, the theft of the padlock from the jail door, and the hiding of the gun in the jail—after stealing it from the marshal's office. He flits here and there like a mischievous ghost. I've never been able to decide whether he's really crazy or whether he still retains a queer sense of humor."

"I don't care why or what," said Cassidy. "I sure love the old son-of-a-gun. I hope to hell he doesn't get the idea that it will be a good joke to blow up the jail—while we're in it."

Cassidy hid the Colt beneath the mattress, for he had heard voices outside. He looked through the barred window and saw Marshal Hogan talking to the Mexican who was guarding the jail door.

"When yuh gonna feed us?" Cassidy inquired.

"Shut up, yuh damn' cowthief, or yuh won't get fed," Hogan answered profanely. "I'll be around again tonight. I'll take yuh out and feed yuh then—maybe."

Chapter VI

A BOTTLE AND A LAMP

IT WAS nearly twilight—the sun was just disappearing below the crests of the mountains far to the west—when Cassidy again saw Hogan, who was coming across the plaza to the jail. And Cassidy, painfully sober and very hungry, was in an ugly mood. Therefore, when the marshal untwisted the wire from the eyebolts and pushed the door open, that officer was due for a well ripened bunch of trouble.

"Come on out; I'm takin' yuh over to eat," said Hogan.

"Come on in," said Cassidy. "I think Rooney has died. It's all your fault, too."

Hogan, revolver in hand, started to enter.

Sput-t! Cassidy suddenly reached out from behind the door and with the barrel and cylinder of his Colt slammed Marshal Hogan right across the dimples in the crown of his hat. Several hours of stored up grievance were behind the blow. Hogan went down just within the doorway as though he had been struck with a sledgehammer, his revolver clattering on the floor.

Cassidy felt a lot better. He quickly stepped across Hogan's prostrate form and jammed the muzzle of the Colt against the Mexican's stomach.

"Come on in," Cassidy invited, using his left hand to grasp the Mexican's shoulder; "I think Marshal Hogan is sick."

"Pick up that gun," Cassidy ordered Rooney, jerking his head toward Hogan's revolver on the floor. "That's right. Now take the gun away from this hombre. He's so scared that if I leggo of him he'll fall down."

Rooney grinned happily as he plucked the Colt from the Mexican's holster. Rooney's brain had been educated to the law, but his Irish blood still remained natural. He felt vaguely shocked at the fact that he was enjoying the situation.

"So far, so good," he said. "But what good is it going to do us—and what do we do next?"

"Danged if I know," said Cassidy, releasing his grasp on the Mexican and using that hand to tilt his hat forward and scratch the back of his head. He peered out through the doorway and felt relieved when he saw no rush of indignant citizens toward the jail. Apparently the little episode in the doorway had been unobserved. He stooped, tugged mightily to drag Hogan out of the way, and then kicked the door closed with his heel.

"Yep, so far so good, as you put it," said Cassidy. "But I ain't doin' no thinkin' right now. Lawyers get paid for thinkin'. Le's see yuh blossom out with a idea."

"I'm completely at sea," Rooney confessed. "My first thought was to get away from here and back to headquarters. This situation is a little beyond me, right now."

"What?" said Cassidy. "Yuh wantuh leave here? Now that we've got things comin' our way?"

"That was only my first thought. I've changed my mind." Rooney grinned as he waggled the two Colts. Their muzzles moved up and down, pointing all the time at various portions of the Mexican cowboy's anatomy.

"Why don't yuh shoot him and be done with it?" Cassidy inquired. "You're scarin' that lad to death."

"Oh, I was just trying to think. I wish Ezra Skinner would show up. He might help to simplify things."

"Yeh, he might, at that. He could go out and get me some whisky. Then I could catch up and go out and do some thinkin' myself. This here thing is gonna take a lot of thinkin'."

DARKNESS was rapidly increasing in the jail. The only light came through the barred window.

"I got an idea," said Cassidy. "It didn't take any thinkin', either; it just came natural."

"What's the idea?"

"It's gettin' dark. We can lock the jail with that piece of wire and we can both go out and get a drink. Ain't that a lulu of an idea?"

"No," Rooney replied thoughtfully. "It has some good points, to be sure, but it has some handicaps. We would be recognized."

"Huh! Them that recognizes us is gonna be outa luck, tha's all. I ain't feelin' like no gentle li'l lamb. I feel awful bad—kinda overwillin' to make some other foks feel the same way."

"Well," said Rooney, "how about my putting on this cowboy's jacket and hat and going out to get a bottle?"

"Wha's the idea in stealin' this boy's clothes?"

"I thought it might help."

"Is thasso?" Cassidy stooped to pick up Marshal Hogan's hat. He tried it on; it was a fair fit. He removed the badge from the officer's vest. "Well, if you're gonna be a Mex cowboy, I'm gonna be the town marshal. Help me get Hogan's coat off."

They finally stepped out of the gloomy jail and fastened the eyebolts together with the wire. The process of lighting kerosene lamps was going on in the town. Lights were springing up here and there in various places of business around the plaza.

Cassidy sat down on the oak plank that was in place as a step in front of the jail door. "I'm squattin' right here till you get back with a bottle," he announced. "And hurry back! Don't stop to be sociable with nobody. I got poisoned last night and I'm still needin' an antydote for it. No foolin'! I wouldn't let yuh go to get it—I'd go to get it myself—except that I've got the wrong shape. You got a better chance than I got of oozin' into a place and gettin' a bottle without gettin' rekernized. Pull your hat low and keep your head down."

"But how about money? The marshal took my purse."

"Shucks!" Cassidy untwisted the wire from the door. "Go in and take everything yuh can find in Hogan's pockets. He took everything he found in mine. I'll be ready to plug that Mexican if he makes a move." Which was a bluff, for the cowboy could have taken advantage of the darkness within the jail if he had possessed enough nerve to attack Rooney.

A minute later, Rooney started blithely toward the saloon that had the least illumination within. He had left the Mexican's gun with Cassidy; he carried Marshal Hogan's Colt, the long barrel stuck into the waistband of his trousers, with his vest pulled down to conceal the butt.

And just as Rooney stepped into the second class saloon to ask for a bottle of first class whisky, Cassidy had a visitor. He loomed up without warning from the darkness. He had pussyfooted around a corner of the jail. He showed up with a startling suddenness that made Cassidy almost pull in his head like a turtle as he raised the muzzle of a Colt to cover the newcomer.

"Oh, I see that you really *are* on guard," came a voice from the darkness. Cassidy immediately recognized the voice. The speaker was Judge Gonzales.

The judge took a few steps nearer Cassidy, which served to outline him against the lights across the plaza. His heavy figure was unmistakable. He was within four feet of Cassidy, who slowly arose, his Colt gripped tight in his right hand. The gun swung in a swift arc, which terminated abruptly against the judge's skull. The judge went down. Cassidy arose to his full height. He grinned as he looked around and listened. He felt at peace with the world, momentarily. There had been much purpose, precision and prejudice behind his arm and guiding his eye as he had swung the heavy revolver to a satisfying smack against the scalp that covered a crooked judicial brain.

Cassidy stooped, seized the judge by the ankles and tried to drag him nearer the jail door. He could barely drag; when he tried to lift the limp form by the middle, both ends sagged. But he finally managed to seat the judge on the step and prop him up against the door. The judge's head slid over onto Cassidy's shoulder; his whole weight started sliding, but Cassidy braced himself and sat there listening to the music that had started in a honkatonk across the plaza.

Rooney returned with a pint bottle from which the cork had been with-

drawn. Cassidy took a long gargle. "Woof!" He got up and shook himself. The judge flopped down sideways on the bench.

"Wh-what's that?" Rooney inquired. startled.

"Oh, that's my friend, Judge Gonzales. We been sittin' here together waitin' for you to get back. The judge oughta be ashamed of himself; he's drunk—or somethin'. Help me get him intuh the jail, where he belongs." Cassidy placed the bottle on the step and opened the door. "Keep your gun ready," he said aloud. "Shoot if anybody tries to come out."

"Sh-h!" Rooney warned him. "Here comes somebody."

"Fine!" Cassidy whispered. "He can help us boost the judge intuh jail."

The newcomer proved to be a Mexican. He also proved to be very docile when two guns were stuck into his face. Cassidy searched him and took away a revolver and a long knife. Rooney held a gun on the Mexican and forced him to assist Cassidy in handling the judge. When Gonzales had been dragged into the jail, Cassidy reached out, gave his unwilling assistant a push and backheeled him. The Mexican landed on his shoulders somewhere in the gloom of the cell. Cassidy swung the door closed behind him as he stepped out. He grinned cheerfully as he replaced the wire on the eyebolts.

"Hey," he said in alarm, as a gurgle reached his ears. "Leave the bottle alone, Rooney. I hadn't even started on it."

But, with the direct menace of gun muzzles removed, the last prisoner had recovered from his fright. He was shouting through the window, calling upon all his friends and relatives to come to his assistance. He was competing, however, with a specialty in a nearby dancehall, where a key bugle duet was being played. The Mexican's voice had no chance against the blatant horns. Cassidy walked over, reached up to the bars and pulled himself into a position where he could outshout the Mexican.

"Hey, you!" he yelled. "Do yuh know what coil oil is? Well, we gotta whole can of it out here, with the top cut out. If you don't shut up *pronto,* we'll throw part of it through the window and the rest of it against the outside walls. Then we'll touch a match to it and walk away. Savvy!"

Marshal Hogan had recovered consciousness. He heard this threat. He managed to arise and stagger to the window. "You can't bluff *me* like that!" he blustered.

"Tha's too bad, ain't it?" said Cassidy sweetly. "Think it over before yuh call my bluff. We're desperate men; keep that in mind. And talk to Judge Gonzales; he's layin' in there with yuh." Cassidy dropped back to the ground. He did not like the situation. He had lied about the kerosene. If Hogan called the bluff——

AT ONE side of the plaza, in front of a livery stable, two freight wagons had stopped some time before. The horses had been placed in the stable to be fed; the drivers had gone into a nearby saloon. And now from the endgate of each wagon hung a lighted lantern. These were to illuminate the vicinity of the wagons and thus discourage sneak thievery.

Cassidy ran toward the wagons. The key bugles were on the second verse of "Ben Bolt." He hoped the musicians would do their duty and play all five verses. Boldly he ran to the nearest lantern and turned it out. He snatched it off the nail and hastened back to where the puzzled attorney awaited.

"You're crazy, or drunk," whispered Rooney. "If there's anything we *don't* want right here, it's a lantern."

"Thasso? Well, it ain't lit—as yuh might notice." Cassidy unscrewed the small metal cap over the hole through which the lantern could be filled with kerosene. "I'm makin' good on a bluff, tha'sall," he whispered. "Gimme that bottle. I can't trust yuh with it." He held it up against the lights from across the plaza to ascertain how much was left of the pint. "Should say I can't trust yuh! You leave this stuff alone. One of us has gotta stay sober—and it ain't gonna be me! I can't think when I'm that way."

Cassidy tucked the bottle inside his shirt, then went over to the window. He held the lantern tightly in both hands as he swung it upward in a way that forced some of the kerosene out of the filling hole. The coal oil splashed through the window bars and against Marshal Hogan's face. Cassidy swung

the lantern again and again until he had emptied the fount. About a pint of kerosene had been dashed into the jail. The bars and the window ledge were dripping with it. The pair of key bugles were on the point of forgetting Sweet Alice for the night. The music ceased, a momentary lull before an accordion and a fiddle struck up a waltz in another dancehall.

"Smell that stuff," said Cassidy to the prisoners. "I know yuh think I'm bluffing, but smell and think about the five gallons I got down here. This coil oil costs money; I hate to waste it. I was just givin' yuh a small sample. If I dump some more through the window I ain't goin' to waste it. Nope! I'm gonna touch a match to it, just to see what happens. One yell outa anybody in there and yuh'll get a free taste of hell. Yuh'll probably smother if yuh don't roast—and I'll give odds that this sun dried jail burns down in twenty minutes!"

Cassidy was talking fast but low. He stopped and heaved a small breath of relief when the accordion and fiddle tuned in.

"Yuh wouldn't burn us up?" There was a skeptical note in Hogan's voice.

"Nope! I sure wouldn't," said Cassidy. "The coil oil would do it. All I'll do is touch a match to it. Yuh know what coil oil is; yuh can't trust the stuff."

Be it known that in 1890, kerosene was a highly inflammable liquid, when compared to the modern product.

"And I'm tellin' yuh that Judge Gonzales is in there with yuh," Cassidy continued. "If yuh don't believe me, yuh just ask the judge to look it up in his book and he'll tell yuh that coil oil burns like hell. Why, I betcha I could start a fire just by shootin' off my Colt against the wall."

"But you wouldn't do that!"

"The hell I won't—if yuh start any yellin'. Shucks! Go on and holler; I want to find out if I really can start a fire with my gun. If it don't work, I can use a match. But I wanta try the gun. I never had a chance to find out about that before. A fellah's got to try those things before he knows for sure what's gonna happen. This looks like a lulu of a chance to me."

"For cripes sake, *don't!*" Hogan implored. Threats would not have scared the marshal half as much as did Cassidy's cheerful willingness to attempt what might be called a scientific experiment. Hogan doubted very much that Cassidy would strike a match and coldbloodedly start a fire. But to try an experiment with his Colt? That was different. Hogan knew all about the playfulness of half drunk cowboys. Hogan was scared. He did not know whether or not the black powder flames from the revolver muzzle would really set fire to the kerosene. He was afraid of the experiment. The more he thought it over, the greater became his fear. He wilted.

"For cripes sake, don't try it," he begged. "I'll keep everybody quiet."

"Shucks!" Disgust and disappointment seemed to lie heavily in Cassidy's tone.

"Of course," Hogan went on, "you know all this ain't goin' to do you no good. What'll happen tomorrow morning? If you take my advice, you'll be south of the border by then." The marshal's one desire was to make Cassidy forget about trying the kerosene experiment with the Colt. "I ain't got nothin' against you," Hogan continued. "Take my advice and hit the breeze. You won't be able to fight the whole town, tomorrow."

"Shucks! Ain't yuh gonna holler?" Cassidy inquired hopefully.

"No, we're not!" Hogan was emphatic. "Let us alone; that's all we ask. Forget that coal oil idea. The whole jail stinks with the stuff right now. We don't want any more. We'll keep still."

"Shucks!" Cassidy grinned widely in the darkness. He uncorked the bottle and took another drink. He was beginning to enjoy himself. "Aw, please," he coaxed, "just one li'l yell."

"You get to hell away from here," said Hogan desperately. "You got us locked in. Can't you let us alone?"

"Shucks! I betchuh don't like me, Hogan. Yuh won't give a man a chance. Come to think of it, though; yuh did give me a chance to get a drink this mornin'." Cassidy held the whisky bottle, with its very much lowered contents, up to the bars. "Since yuh ain't gonna yell, how about a li'l drink?"

"Thanks," said the marshal, "I sure appreciate it. And I'm tellin' you again to get out of town. What you need before morning is a long head start."

"What I need," said Cassidy, "is an-

other drink." He started to walk away. "You stay here, Rooney. If anybody hollers, douse 'em with half that can of coil oil. Then shoot a gun against the wall. I wanta find out if doin' that will start coil oil to burnin'."

"What I need," said Rooney, "is some food. And I'm going to get it right now. I'll bring you some sandwiches. You stay here."

"Bring another bottle, too. I'm just beginnin' to get started to doin' some high class thinkin'."

"Wait till I eat and I'll help you. So long." Rooney departed. Cassidy sat down on the step in front of the jail door.

Chapter VII

A shot of bitters

CASSIDY looked up at the stars, which were beginning to show through a thin, high stratum of haze. He tried to think. His thoughts went to Shorthand Conway, then in turn to the thousand dollars, to the forty cows that had disappeared, and to the missing bill of sale. The moon began to appear from behind a cloud. Cassidy looked down and saw lying on one end of the step two Colts and a long knife. He arose, picked up the weapons and threw them onto the roof of the jail. They thumped and clattered on the planks. He imagined he heard another sound on the roof—something like a person moving abruptly, together with a stifled exclamation. He listened. For a moment he contemplated going around to the rear of the jail and attempting to get on the roof to investigate. But his listening brought no result beyond hearing voices and movements within the jail. Yes, he decided, the noise had been inside. Then came music again from a dancehall.

Cassidy looked around the now moonlit plaza. Four cowboys rode into town from the north. He envied their carefree profane argument as to which saloon they would enter first. They tied their horses at a hitchrack. Two of the cowboys went in through the lighted entrance of a dancehall; the other two entered the Socorro Saloon. Cassidy wondered if they were from the C-Bar-4.

Then Rooney returned, carrying a bottle in one hand and a sandwich in the other. Cassidy was nervous. He had his Colt out and pointed at Rooney. Then he laughed.

"By golly, yuh sure look different in the moonlight in that Mex's hat and bolero."

"You'd better eat this sandwich," said Rooney.

"*One* san'wich? That ain't enough! That would only tantalize me. When I eat I want somethin' *to* eat—somethin' to sink my teeth intuh."

"Try this," grinned Rooney. "I requested some sandwiches to take with me, and they said they didn't make sandwiches. So I stuck half of my slab of steak between two slabs of bread and brought it along. That wasnt' any sacrifice on my part. Just try to sink your teeth into it. It was butchered this morning. You can't even chew it."

"Thasso? I've got good teeth and a strong jaw." Cassidy grabbed the sandwich and disposed of it in less than a minute. "Yuh oughta brought the other half of your steak. This sample was fine. I like my meat fresh that way. The flavor is better."

"When does the next train go through here—east?" Rooney inquired.

"I ain't got no almanac with me. C'mere and sit down. Yuh come here to be my lawyer and I might's well try to get some use outa yuh. Maybe yuh can do some of my thinkin' for me. Gimme that bottle."

"I'm glad that you have sobered up," said Rooney.

"Just keep on bein' glad, if it makes yuh feel any better. I never was drunk. Why, I hadn't even started to do any thinkin'. I was just playin' the cards as they fell, and alla time wonderin' what was gonna happen next. I'm still wonderin'."

"So am I. As the marshal put it, what will happen tomorrow? Have you thought about that?"

"Nope! And I ain't gonna. I got enough worries without doin' that. My big worry is my pardner. He says he's a business man. I like him fine, but his idea of bein' a business man is to be a doubtin' pestiferist. Yuh got no idea of how long he can keep on chasing one subject at a time. Yuh'd think it was dead and buried, but Conway will allus keep diggin' it up for another look. Now, if I go back without them thousand dollars, or without a flock of cows

to show for the money, my pardner'll probably believe my story. I reckon he'll pat me on the shoulder kinda sympathetic-like, and tell me it was hard luck. He'll be sincere about that. But livin' with him will be plain hell. Every day he'll think up and tell me some new way that I mighta kep' outa trouble. Nope! I can't go back and face him without somethin' to show for the pardnership cash he gimme to take along."

CASSIDY shook his head sorrowfully. Then he raised the bottle and took a big drink. Rooney said nothing. Cassidy looked hopefully at him. "Yep!" he said, "I see that I gotta do my own thinkin'. You lawyers ain't no good in a pinch. Yuh think as high as ketchin' a train; then your brains go back on yuh." Again Cassidy tilted the bottle, but this time Rooney firmly snatched it away.

"I'm not going to take up your gratuitous insults," said Rooney. "What I'm going to do is to take a big drink. No crazy cowpuncher by the name of Cassidy is going to outthink me. My idea was——"

"*Was* is right," Cassidy broke in jeeringly. "Yuh thunk up all your thoughts over in Gonzales' court. And where did your thoughts get yuh? Into this here jail; that's where. And who got yuh out? I did!"

"Give due credit to old Ez Skinner; he stole the lock and planted the gun," grinned Rooney.

"Yeh, he gimme the chance, all right. We've done right well by ourselves since. Now, if you can just forget that you're a lawyer and remember only that your name is Rooney and that yuh don't like a lot of the folks in this town I betchuh we can do ourselves a lotta more good. We've sure got a good start."

"What's your idea?" Rooney inquired hopefully as he finished taking another drink.

"Danged if I know. What was yours?"

"To get out of town and get Territorial warrants for everybody on charges of conspiracy, obstructing justice, malfeasance, maladministration, perjury and everything else I could think of."

"Them sound fine. But how yuh gonna prove any of it? Yuh gotta have witnesses, or something. And the kind of witnesses yuh'll get in Tres Pecos will outswear yuh ten or twelve to one."

"Um-m! But what kind of witnesses will they be? Few of them, if any, will be able to come into court with clean hands; we can discredit most of them with the evidence the association has on file."

"Yeh! But how about my forty cows? Or the thousand bucks? And, say, who the hell do yuh think you are?" Cassidy grabbed the bottle and took the drink that Rooney was starting to take. He downed Rooney's share and his own on top of it.

"Woof! Rooney, I sure stopped yuh from ruinin' yourself. Don't yuh know that it ain't healthy to drink after eatin' a meal? I didn't have no meal; I just had a san'wich, which leaves me free to have the custody of this here bottle. You and me won't make a bad team—if *you* leave whisky alone! Aperperpo of what yuh was just sayin' about discreditin' witnesses, and likewise aperperpo of what I was just sayin', it kinda hit me all of a sudden that the more of these here discreditable witnesses we can stick in jail the better off we'll be. Yep! Especially tomorrow. You betchuh! The more of these probable witnesses we put in jail, the smaller the trouble we'll have on our hands, come daylight."

"We-ell," said Rooney slowly and thoughtfully, "you are probably right. We might as well be sheep as lambs. But how will we get more of them in jail?"

"We-ell," drawled Cassidy, deliberately mimicking the attorney, "right here I got Hogan's badge." Cassidy paused to take another drink and then grin cheerfully. "And right here," he continued, "I got my own gun. She's a good li'l gun; she ain't failed me yet. Besides them equipment, I got a big grouch to get out of my system. It sure looks like a lulu of an opportunity, seein' that we got a good jail to take care of any of these here now discreditable witnesses that are runnin' around loose and careless. I hate sheep; but I hate worse to be a lamb. I'm just gonna out and sorta raise myself—and mebbe you, too—intuh the sheep class. Savvy?"

"Not quite—yet," said Rooney.

"That's because yuh went and et a

big meal and ruined your brain for thinkin' purposes. Yuh got somebody's Colt, all loaded, tucked in the front of your pants. I never thought to insult yuh before by askin' if yuh know how to use it, if yuh hafta. Do yuh, can yuh and will yuh?"

"Well, I don't know. You see, Cassidy, it's this way: I have been told that I'm a fair marksman with a Colt at a target, but I have never shot anybody."

"It's the spirit behind the gun that counts," said Cassidy. "The target shooting was good practice. All yuh have to do here in Tres Pecos is to keep that Colt in your hand—*and shoot before the target does.* Savvy? Just remember that. And do it, if anybody comes around the jail. I'm goin' out right now to mingle with the community and mebbe make myself useful to us."

"What are you going to do first?"

"There yuh go, alla time askin' questions. How in cockeyed blazes do I know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna do it, tha's all. S'long! Hold down the jail till I get back." Cassidy walked around to the rear of the building, where he stopped to take another drink. His intention had been to hide the bottle by placing it on the ground in the shadow of the wall. But he bumped into a large, empty box, which gave him another idea. He stepped onto the box, reached up with the bottle and placed it on the flat roof of the jail. "That's sure a nice safe hiding place," he congratulated himself. "Rooney won't find it there."

With that, he walked out of the deep shadow and into the moonlight as he blithely started for the Socorro Saloon. He had gone barely twenty yards when he saw someone coming directly toward him. It was another Mexican cowboy. Cassidy promptly stuck him up and marched him to the jail.

"Open the door, Rooney," he said with a grin. "Lemme add this boy to our collection."

WHEN the wire had been replaced on the jail door, Cassidy started again for the Socorro. He peeked inside. Much to his disappointment, young Domingo Gallo was not visible. The only customers at the bar were two of the American cowboys who had recently arrived in town. The door opened from the back room. A tough looking cowboy started across the room toward the front door. Cassidy stepped back into the shadow of the building and let him go by. He watched for a minute and saw the tough looking vaquero disappear through the doors of a saloon halfway down that side of the plaza.

"Golly!" muttered Cassidy, tilting his hat down on his face scratching the crown of his head. The hat fell off. He suddenly remembered that it was Marshal Hogan's hat, likewise Hogan's coat and badge that he was wearing. He sauntered past the doorway, just in time to see Domingo Gallo and another man step from the back room and up to the bar.

Cassidy was not exactly drunk. He merely felt very confident, and the thought that Gallo probably had the thousand dollars on his person was too much. Cassidy pulled the hat down to his eyebrows, made certain that his Colt was loose in the waistband of his overalls, then stepped into the Socorro. He kept his head bowed and tried to shrink down to Hogan's height as he walked across to the bar. He grinned to himself as someone jovially called out, "Hello, Hogan!"

He quickly lost the start of the grin and began to call himself several kinds of a fool. But it was too late to back out. Gallo turned, recognized the hat and coat and demanded, "Why are you not at the jail?"

Cassidy decided that the only way out was to get into action first. Still keeping his head bowed, the hat brim allowing his gaze to go no higher than Gallo's gaudy sash, he walked up to the Mexican. Cassidy's right hand was dangling loosely at his side. He stopped, his left foot advanced, right in front of Gallo, who stood with arms akimbo, thinking up choice invectives with which to flay the errant marshal. Cassidy lifted his head. He looked for a split second into the Mexican's eyes, and, as recognition glinted in the latter, Cassidy's right fist swung up viciously from his thigh. He made a bull's-eye on Gallo's jaw. The whole weight of his upper body and wide shoulders together with the strength of his right leg, went into the blow. He had been on his toes as he struck, and he pivoted on the ball of his left foot as the uppercut smashed home.

Gallo was almost lifted from his feet. He caromed off the bar and thudded limply on the floor. The next instant, Cassidy, his Colt in his right hand, was crouching over him. The gun muzzle threatened everybody. Even as his gaze swept the room to note the reaction of the spectators, his left hand was exploring within the folds of Gallo's sash.

"Jumping Josephine! What a wallop!" exclaimed one of the young American cowboys. "I betcha that fella don't like Gallo none." Surprise suddenly registered on his face. "Why, it's Slivers Cassidy!"

His companion was a little older and probably knew more about Gallo, Tres Pecos and things in general. He wasted no time in exclaiming; he simply pulled his Colt, backed along the bar for a few feet and stood there, waiting, alert, his gun ready. Cassidy, in a swift glance, recognized them as being from the C-Bar-4, which made him feel a little better, for he was sure they would back his play.

The older man did. His Colt swung around to cover the bartender. *"Don't!"* was all he said. The bartender didn't.

"Thanks!" said Cassidy.

"Don't mention it," grinned the other. "I was here with yuh six years ago." He glowered momentarily at his younger companion. "What'nell yuh carry that gun for?" he barked out. "A danged ornament?"

The young cowboy's surprise turned swiftly to confusion. His face turned red beneath the healthy tan. Out came his Colt. "Wh-whut yuh w-w-want m-me to d-d-do?" he stuttered. The stuttering had been caused by sheer embarrassment.

"Stand on your haid and count tuh ten," was the grinning advice. "That allus cures thuh symptoms yuh got."

"B-but I ain't scared! Honestly, Blazes, I ain't! Gosh! I just stopped to admire that wallop. Best wallop I ever seen or heard of."

Blazes grinned again, without relaxing in the slightest his vigilance. "Go over and stand jest inside thuh door," he ordered. "Don't let your admirin' that wallop stop yuh from pluggin' anybody who makes a crooked move." He turned to address Cassidy. "Yuh gottuh excuse thuh kid," he apologized. "He's willin' as hell! tha's why I lets him string along with me. I likes him —but he's only nineteen, an' this is thuh fust public disagreement that he's ever had a chance to horn in on. He's got a natchul talent with a six-gun, which thuh same some of these gents will find out, now that thuh kid's kinduh recovered hisself."

CASSIDY straightened up. In his left hand was a folded piece of paper. He had been looking for the thousand dollars, but, much to his surprise, had found the bill of sale, which Gallo had tucked carelessly in his sash. He flipped it open, glanced at it briefly to make sure that it really was the bill of sale for the forty cows, then crumpled it down into a pocket of his overalls. He looked around. The two cowboys from the C-Bar-4 had the situation well in hand. Everybody was meek and trying to look friendly. Cassidy and Blazes exchanged grins.

"Seems to call for a drink," said Cassidy. "A drink all around. Step up, boys; don't be bashful."

They stepped, they drank—and then Cassidy suddenly remembered that he had no money. Rooney had taken their mutual funds from the marshal, and still had the cash.

Cassidy had taken his drink with one foot resting on Gallo instead of the footrail. He stooped again to search the Mexican.

"Whatcha doin'?" inquired Blazes, grinning. "Robbin' your dead?"

"G'wan! I never hit him *that* hard."

"My mistake," grinned Blazes; "I thought yuh tried to. If yuh'd swing down, instead of up, yuh'd 'a' driv' him clean through thuh floor. I'm sorry for one thing—nope, two things."

"What's them?"

"That I never really tried tuh find out how hard I can hit a man with my fist—and that I never thought of tryin' thuh same experiment on Gallo. Douse some water on him, let him stand up, then lemme see if I can hit him harder than you did."

"What's the use? He's gonna stay hit for the rest of the night, it looks like." Cassidy arose, in one hand a thick packet of currency.

"You'll go to jail for that," said the bartender.

"Haw-haw!" laughed Cassidy. "Yuh oughta see your jail now. Which reminds me—" He shoved the currency

into a pocket, stuck the barrel of the Colt into the waistband of his overalls, stooped down, and came up with Gallo's limp form draped across one shoulder like an empty gunnysack.

"Hold the fort a minute till I get back, will yuh, Blazes? Let anybody in who wants to, but don't let nobody go out."

"Yuh betchuh! Goin' out and bury him?"

"Nope! He ain't honest, so I'm gonna put him in jail."

"Hey, you ain't paid for them drinks yet," said the bartender.

"Chalk 'em up to Gallo. I leave it to anybody if the drinks ain't on him." Cassidy hunched his shoulder to shift Gallo into a better balanced position, then walked out through the door.

Rooney was not in sight when Cassidy arrived at the jail with his burden, which had grown very heavy. He turned around, wondering where the attorney had gone.

"Raise your hands!" came a low voiced command, as Rooney, his Colt cocked and ready, tiptoed from around a corner of the building. "Oh"—in relief—"it's you, Cassidy. I couldn't figure out what was coming, so I took no chances."

"You're sure learning fast," was Cassidy's compliment. "Open the door—and be ready to shoot if anybody tries to come out."

"Whom are you carrying?"

"Try and guess," grinned Cassidy, leaning over to deposit his burden inside the jail door. "Hogan, here's your boss. I hope he ain't hurt—much. All I did was to skin a flock of good knuckles on his jaw. I only hit him once, at that."

Rooney used his left hand to close the door; the Colt was in his right. Cassidy fumbled with the piece of wire and finally twisted it again through the eyebolts.

"Was that Gallo?" Rooney inquired.

"Yeh; but he don't seem to be takin' much interest in things."

"What—how did you do it?" in amazement.

"Why, I walked up to him, hit him with my fist and then carried him over here. And say, I got that bill of sale back. The danged fool had kep' it."

"That may help a lot. But what do we do next?"

"*You're* gonna stay right here! Me? I'm gettin' ambitious. While I'm at it, I might's well *fill up* this jail. Savvy?"

"What good will that do?"

"Well, if this thing keeps up, there won't be any war in the morning. How *can* there be, if we've got all the warriors in jail?"

"Suffering sassafras!" Rooney chuckled. "Keep up the good work while you feel lucky. But in the meantime I greatly desire and crave an opportunity to send a telegram. Can't you let me off long enough to do it?"

"Uh-uh! Should say *not!* No telegram can do as much good as I can do, if you'll just sit tight here and gimme a free hand."

"But listen, Slivers——"

"I'm listenin'. Give 'er the spurs."

"You don't seem to understand."

"The hell I don't. You wanta send a telegram."

"Exactly. But you——"

"Aw, shut up! Ain't I doin' fine?"

"Ye-es, but you miss the point."

"Well, I never missed the point of Gallo's chin when I swung at him."

"But you can't keep this up forever."

"Who says I can't?"

"Now, you've been drinking too much, and you——"

"I never did. I ain't had no chance to. I been too busy."

"I admire your mother," said Rooney. "She must have been a wonderful woman——"

"She sure was."

"—To let you live," Rooney finished. "She must have been the possessor of the patience of eleven saints rolled into one. She must have been a very kindly, very patient woman. How she must have suffered. Did you have any brothers?"

"Now looky here," said Cassidy. "I ain't sure whether you're joshin' me or not. I take it that you're joshin', and I'll let it go at that. You've gone far enough."

"Not yet. I want to send a telegram."

"I don't see any sense in that. Ain't I doin' fine, without no telegram?"

"But you——"

"All right," Cassidy interrupted. "I know all about that. Tell yuh what; if you'll forget about that telegram, I'll be the fairy godmother and give yuh two more wishes. What are they?"

"Fair enough," grinned Rooney. "I wish I could have been your stepfather

for several years when you were very, very young. I would have made a Christian out of you. That's wish number two. And for the third wish; well, right now I wish I had a drink of whisky. You see, Cassidy, I'm not acclimated yet to this high tension under the moon. Let me have a drink."

"Shucks! If tha's all yuh want, I'll get it for yuh." Cassidy walked around to the rear of the jail. He stepped onto the box. His exploring hand met the bottle that he had set back a few inches from the edge of the flat roof.

So far, so good. He dropped back to the ground. The bottle felt very light, suspiciously so. He had it between his eyes and the moon, to gauge the contents. But there were no contents. The bottle was empty. He went back to Rooney.

"You doggawn cheater!" he growled. "Here yuh been joshin' me about needin' a drink, and alla time while I was out workin' hard yuh been doin' nawthin' but fill your skin with my private supply that I had cached away for the time of need. I oughta knowed it. None of you lawyers is to be trusted—especially with whisky, or anything else."

Cassidy's back was to the moon. He had a good look at Rooney's face while the tirade was being delivered. Rooney strongly registered surprise and innocence. Cassidy in turn was surprised at this.

"You wrong me," said the attorney. "I haven't had a drink since you left. I never left the jail door until I saw you coming with Gallo on your shoulder. Then I merely went around the corner and kept watching until I stepped out and held you up."

"But the bottle's empty, plumb empty! She was half full when I cached her away. Yuh sure look innercent. But maybe you lawyers get trained to look that way. I suspect thuh whole tribe of yuh. But, honest to gosh, Rooney, yuh sure looked innercent."

"I am, damn it!" said Rooney, grinning. "I thought you had taken that bottle away with you."

"I sure can't help believin' yuh, for yuh sure looked funny. I can't savvy how that licker got drunk."

"I have my suspicions," said Rooney.

"Concernin' who?"

"The best detective on our staff. Ez Skinner. I wish he would show up. I want him to send that telegram for me."

"Well, all I gotta say," drawled Cassidy, "is that if it was Skinner he sure done some fine work in detectin' that whisky. Yep! He sure did. I had that bottle hid out pretty darned slick."

"Now, about that telegram—" Rooney began.

"Forget it. Your job is to hold down the jail while I go out and try to fill it. You stay right there. There'll be hell poppin' if somebody comes along and untwists that wire."

"You don't understand," said Rooney. "Give me that bill of sale. It might be the finishing piece of evidence that we need."

"Sure. Here it is." Cassidy dug up the crumpled piece of paper. "I forgot tuh tell yuh that I got the thousand dollars back, too. I'm goin' over and count 'em, just to be sure. S'long!"

Cassidy walked back along one side of the plaza. He approached the Socorro Saloon.

"Fight, yuh stinkin', damned coyote!" he heard somebody snap out angrily. He recognized Blazes' voice. "Put up your fists, yuh dirty dawg! Git off that floor. Git up! D'yuh want me to kick your ribs in so far that they'll puncture your black heart? I'll sure do it, if yuh don't git up on your feet and lemme show thuh kid that I can hit jest as hard as Cassidy hit Gallo."

Cassidy grinned as he hastened toward the door. He entered the saloon, in time to see the bartender, lying on the floor in the center of the room, receive a hearty kick from Blazes.

"Git up!" yelped the angry cowboy, again planting the toe of his boot against the bartender's ribs. Blazes looked up as Cassidy entered. Cassidy had pushed aside the barrel of the Colt held by the younger cowboy from the C-Bar-4.

"Yuh danged young fool!" Blazes burst forth. "Look at what jest happened. Git some sense. Git away from that door a coupluh more feet. You're too close. Looky how Cassidy jest now grabbed your gun barrel. Yuh sure need edickatin'."

"Aw, let him alone," said Cassidy. "He saw it was me, or he'd 'a' done some salivatin'. I saw the look in the kid's eyes. He thinks plumb fast. And what's troublin' you, Blazes? Yuh don't seem to like that barkeep none."

"Like him?" Blazes snorted. "D'yuh know what I caught him tryin' to do?"

"I'll bite, Mistuh Blazes; what did yuh ketch him a-tryin' to do?" A grin.

"I thought I saw him tryin' to dump some sleepin' sand intuh a drink I ordered special for myself."

"Yeh? What happened then?"

"Why, I jest hopped over that bar like a frog. I made him swalluh that same drink. Yuh betchuh! Then I threw him over the bar—he lit on his ear—and I been out here ever since tryin' tuh make him stand up and fight. I wantuh show thuh kid how good a wallop I got myself. But he won't git up on his feet." There was a real grievance in the cowboy's voice. He seemed to be feeling very much hurt because the bartender refused to get up and fight.

"Well," grinned Cassidy, "if yuh made him swalluh the same kind uh drink that I drank last night, he's forgot all his ambitions, and everything else, for the night. It sure affected me that way. I woke up this morning on the jail floor. And I sure felt awful sick. He'll feel the same way, and I'd admire to see him wake up in the same place."

"Fair enough," said Blazes. "But how yuh gonna open that padlock?"

"There ain't no padlock. One of my friends stole it."

"Yip-pee!" Blazes howled joyfully. "Stole! D'yuh mean it?"

"I sure do. She was stole just as slick as yuh please."

BLAZES ran over and vaulted the bar. He snatched several bottles from the back shelf and placed them on the imitation mahogany. "Come one, come all," he whooped. "Drinks is on the house. No, by jinks, they ain't! They're on me. I'll settle for 'em—sometime. History has been made in these parts today, gents. We'll drink because that lock's been stole. Which thuh same thing I've tried to do myself and never could make thuh grade."

The poker game in the corner had lagged ever since Cassidy had first entered and knocked out Gallo. The gamblers did not hesitate now in stepping to the bar. Nor did the three men who had been playing rotation pool. The five loungers who had been seated in the row of chairs along the wall hastened to accept the invitation.

"Kid," said Blazes, "you stay right there by the door. You've had your three drinks for the night, anyhow. And there's no glasses to drink out of," Blazes continued, "not while I'm tendin' bar. A bottle to each gent; that's *real* bartendin'!"

Blazes had never gone to school; he could not read. To him a bottle was a bottle. He had set out bottles containing everything from Damiana Bitters to sarsaparilla. In Blazes' lexicon, anything and everything behind a bar was good to drink. The gamut included several brands of Bourbon, rye, Scotch, tequila and gin. He unwisely picked for himself the last choice, a bottle of flavoring bitters that contained ninety per cent. of alcohol and a taste that might have been a compromise between gall and wormwood.

"Here's to the stolen lock. Drink hearty, gents!" And Blazes tried to set an example. He tilted the bottle to his lips.

"Poo-phoo-o-o! Oooooof!" Blazes spluttered and gagged. Tears sprang to his eyes. He was spitting like a cat as he tried to rid his mouth and throat of the burning bitterness. He finally shook his head and spat again.

"Gents," he gasped, "I resign. I've allus wanted to be a barkeep; but I reckon I ain't got enough edication or judgment. Here, you!" He pointed a shaking forefinger at the man who had been running the poker game for the house. "You're elected. Hop over here an' put these bottles back. Fust I wantuh see if yuh qualify. Who was this round on, me or the house?"

"The house," said the gambler, trying to suppress a wide smile. "In my opinion, Mr. Blazes, the house is lucky if you don't try to sue for damages."

"You sure qualify fine." Blazes managed to squeeze out a faint grin, as he climbed back over the bar. "Now set out somepin' to take the taste out of my mouth."

A little later he walked over and prodded the unconscious bartender with his boot. "Whut was it yuh wanted tuh do with him?" he asked Cassidy. "I kinduh got the idee that yuh was doin' some monkey business over at the jail."

"I ain't," said Cassidy. "But somebody else is. Somebody drunk half a bottle of whisky I had cached away. There's sure some monkey business

about how that got drunk up. Yuh never wanta trust any lawyers—not with whisky, or nawthin' else. Nope! Yuh sure don't wanta. They're all slicker than two beaver hats."

"Yeh, but whutchuh doin' over at thuh jail?"

"I ain't quite sure," grinned Cassidy. "Say, I'm all tired out from bein' a packhoss for gents who seem to crave to be in the jail. Le's have a drink; and then I'll let yuh have your turn at packin' somebody. I'll let yuh pack this hombre over there."

"Thuh drink idea is all right," said Blazes, "but I ain't doin' no packin'. Whutchuh s'pose I got thuh kid with me for? He's young an' strong an' willin'. He'll do thuh packin' for us. Won't-chuh, Kid?"

"Sure, if yuh lemme have another drink of whisky."

"Well, yuh get it after yuh've proved yuh kin pack him."

The young cowboy holstered his Colt, spat on his hands and heaved the bartender onto a shoulder. "Le's go!" He headed for the door. Blazes started to follow.

"Yuh better stay here, Blazes," said Cassidy. "Somebody's gotta hold down the fort. Keep lettin' 'em come in, and don't let nobody go out of here."

"Aw, I was gonnuh go along jest to see whut you're pullin' off over at thuh jail."

"I'll come back and tell yuh. How's that?"

A FEW minutes later, Cassidy and the kid returned to the Socorro. They both grinned at Blazes as they walked past him and up to the bar.

"Set 'em up for everybody," Cassidy ordered the gambler who was still acting as substitute bartender.

Everybody drank.

"Now, seein' as you was a good guesser before," Cassidy propounded, "I'm lettin' you make the decision again. Who was this round on?"

"On the house," said the gambler, chuckling. "Did I guess right?"

"Yuh sure did. And, seein' how fond yuh are of Blazes and me, how about pourin' private snifters just for the three of us? No, kid, yuh just had yours. The new barkeep is in on this round, which he told me was likewise on the house."

"Here's how and who!" said Blazes, grinning as he lifted his glass. "Yuh ain't told me yet whut's back of all this monkey business."

"Hold your hosses. I been tryin' to think. This last drink gimme a idea. She's a lulu! I hates pikers—and, come to think of it, I been a piker right along. Now, I got a good jail over there—" Cassidy reached for the bottle on the bar and refilled the glasses. This was a mechanical gesture. His eyes had a dreamy look. He snapped out of it with a devilish grin.

"Yep," he announced, surveying the room and the people in it, "Yep, I sure been a piker. Here, all night, I been workin' to sling people in jail—*one at a time!* That shows I'm a piker."

"Whut's the idee that's a lulu?" Blazes inquired.

"Why, le's jail 'em wholesale, and on the hoof! Le's you and me and the kid march everybody over to the jail and lock 'em up, We can sort 'em out tomorrow. Le's the three of us make the rounds and herd the whole danged town intuh the jail. Ain't that a lulu of a idea? I leave it to yuh; ain't it?"

"My Gawd!" said Blazes, his mouth and eyes opening wide in admiration, as the possibilities dawned on him. "She sure is! We can clean out this saloon and then the next one and the next one—but, say, that danged pint sized jail won't hold the whole danged town."

"Gosh! Mebbe that's so." Cassidy frowned. "But we'll pack 'em in like sardines. 'S too bad them jail walls ain't made of rubber so's they'd stretch and hold more."

"Ain't it too bad they ain't?" said Blazes, helping Cassidy to frown. "But, say"—brightening—"I got a lulu of a idea, myself."

"Blazes, if yuh gotta real idea I'll love yuh like a brother. What's your idea?"

"To have another private drink—on thuh house."

"By golly, that ain't a half bad idea, at that." Cassidy nodded at the substitute bartender. "Have one yourself," he said genially. They drank again.

"Now, kid," said Cassidy, "while me and Blazes holds all these gents spellbound by the power of our eye—with our Colts helpin' to a certain extent—

you just sift around among 'em and make a collection of guns and knives. Chuck the weapons outuh the pool table, if yuh collects more than yuh can carry. And now, you," Cassidy ordered the bartender, "come out of there. You're goin' along with the herd. I hates tuh do it, but they's no other way out of it. If yuh ever need a recommend as a barkeeper, I'll give yuh a couple of 'em."

Chapter VIII

THE MYSTERIOUS LOCK

"HELL!" said Blazes, in a disgusted tone, a minute later. "Ain't *nobody* gonnuh argue? This sure is a hell of a town. A gent who's lookin' for a li'l action can't get none." He counted heads. "Thirteen!" he announced. "And thirteen is unlucky; jest remember that. It's sure gonnuh be unlucky for any of yuh who hollers or does anything else I don't want yuh to do. March out, now, single file, and head that same way to thuh calaboose. I'm jest honin' tuh shoot somebody who gives me a excuse tuh do it. File out, gents; file out!"

Cassidy laughed. "Wasn't it a lulu of a idea, Blazes? It's easier to put 'em in jail than it was to think up the idea."

"They ain't in thuh jail yet," said Blazes. "I'm savin' my laugh till they're there." The thirteen prisoners were being herded out through the door. Six or seven of them had gone out. Blazes made a sudden dash, elbowed his way past the file and disappeared.

Bang! Bang-bang!

Blazes' Colt was still smoking when Cassidy arrived outside.

"What the hell?" Cassidy demanded, glancing swiftly around, his gun ready. "What's happened?"

"Plenty," said Blazes. "I reckon thuh beans are spilled—unless I happened to wing that li'l hombre who was at the head of the line. He made a run for it, the minute he stuck his head outside. I don't reckon I winged him a-tall."

"Why didn't yuh?"

" 'Cause my gun won't shoot around a corner."

"Mine won't, neither," grinned Cassidy. "Mebbe we oughta get us some different kind of guns to use in a case like this. Well, we still got twelve left. Le's be satisfied."

"Twelve whut?"

"Pris'ners. A even dozen of 'em. What more do yuh want?"

"The thirteenth!" spat Blazes. "Yuh got no idee how unlucky he's liable tuh prove tuh be. We'll be havin' thuh whole town on our tails. Move!" he barked at the prisoners. "Hike along! Spur yourselves!" He planted his boot toe viciously against several of them to start the parade.

Cassidy walked along one flank. Blazes dropped back to the young cowboy who was at the rear. "Kid," he whispered hoarsely, "fan outuh here! Kill your hoss a-gittin' home. Tell thuh boys that Cassidy's started a bigger war 'n he kin finish. I'm stickin' to thuh end. Tell thuh boys it's liable to be my finish if they don't get here before daylight. Savvy?" But the kid was already streaking for the place where his horse had been tied.

Not much more than a minute later, the twelve prisoners had been herded to the jail door. Rooney was not in sight. Cassidy felt alarmed. He looked around uncertainly, then walked over to the jail window. In the moonlight he recognized Hogan's face peering through the bars.

"Where's my lawyer?" he inquired.

"Haw!" laughed Hogan. "Ain't that a hell of a question to ask me? I leave it to you. Ain't it?"

Blazes had been standing ten or twelve feet back from the prisoners he had forced to bunch up at the jail portal. He kept glancing nervously over his shoulder at the lights around the plaza.

"We don't need no lawyer," he told Cassidy. "Whut we better do is to cram these lads intuh thuh carcel. That li'l Mex who got away is siftin' around and startin' trouble. Open thuh door."

Cassidy walked back, reached up and fumbled around. His intention was to untwist the wire and open the door.

"Uh!" he grunted suddenly, in mingled surprise and consternation. He turned toward Blazes. His left hand went up and tilted his hat forward. He started to scratch his head. "Uh! Now what——?"

" 'Smatter?" Blazes inquired. "Hurry up and open thuh door."

"*You* come and do it," bade Cassidy. "That big padlock—the one that was stole—is back in place again!"

"G'wan! Did yuh lie to me before or are yuh lyin' now?"

"Never lied once to yuh—at least none tonight. First that lock was stole, now she's back on the door."

"How we gonnuh get these pris'ners intuh the jail?"

"Well, through the door is the only way. It'd take me all night to chop a hole in the roof big enough to drop 'em through. Hey, Hogan, yuh got the key to this padlock?"

"That's none of your business," said Hogan. "Ask your lawyer where it is."

"Where's my lawyer?"

"That's none of *my* business."

"Shucks! I know where he is. I betcha he went to send a telegram," said Cassidy, half to himself. "Say, Blazes, d'yuh reckon yuh can hold these prisoners here till I get back?"

Blazes sat down on the step and began ejecting empty shells from his Colt. "Jest wait till I gets these fresh ca't-'idges in. I'm fillin' her plumb up. Then I'll either hold all of 'em or bump off jest exactly half of 'em. They kin take their choice. But if that lawyer of your'n ain't a gunfighter, he likely ain't gonnuh be much good to us. Lawyers is mostly good for spoutin' words whut don't do no good. And if you ain't got no pussonal int'rest here—outside of that lulu of a idee about fillin' thuh jail—le's you and me fan outuh town and let that lawyer smooth things over for himself. We can meet thuh boys who are comin'—they'll have rifles and carbines—and we can take thuh town apart a hell of a lot easier then."

"You go if yuh wanta," said Cassidy. "If we go 'way, the town'll take my lawyer apart. I been teachin' him somethin' about law ever since we got outa jail. I like him, 'cause he's plumb willin' to learn. He learns fast, savvy. Give him three-four more drinks and he's plumb liable to try to take the town apart all by himself. We gotta lot in common. We was put in jail together. I betcha he hates the town more'n I do. Nope, I ain't gonna leave no promisin' lawyer like that to hold the sack."

'Why didn't yuh say so before?" Blazes inquired. "Don'tchuh know that lawyers like that is awful scarce? But there's somepin' wrong with all lawyers; yuh oughta know that. Whut's wrong with this one of your'n?"

"Well, alla time he wants tuh send telegrams. I betcha his idea of heaven is a place where he can send telegrams alla time. And what good does telegrams ever do?"

"Damned if I know," said Blazes. "But I'm tellin' yuh that telegrams is dangerous. I never got one in my life. If I ever got one, I betchuh I'd be scared to open it. Don't fool yourself, Slivers; telegrams is dangerous things. Mebbe it's better to have a lawyer who sends 'em than to have a lawyer who only gets 'em. Telegrams is like bullets. But who does he send these telegrams to?"

"Damned if I know," said Cassidy. "Long's I was watchin' him, I wouldn't let him send *any!*"

"That's where mebbe yuh made a big mistake. Now, yuh jest fan yourself outuh here and find that lawyer. If he can shoot, we're plumb liable to need him later." Blazes lounged back against the jail door, his right elbow against his hip, his Colt pointed up at a forty-five degree angle. His thumb was on the hammer of the gun. His gaze was centered on the twelve prisoners before him; the corners of his lips curled upward. Blazes was enjoying himself and the situation.

"Well, if you say so. I'd sure like to find Rooney." Cassidy departed.

ROONEY, walking very fast as he came from the railroad depot, rounded a corner and almost bumped into Cassidy.

"Where'n hell yuh been?" the latter demanded. "I betcha yuh've been sendin' telegrams."

"I have. And they'll get *results!* They'll get results so fast that your head will swim!"

"G'wan! I'm about one pint shy of that, yet. Where did yuh get that padlock back again? Gimme the key to it!"

"Why, I have no key! I presume the marshal still has it. All I took from his pockets was money."

"Is that so? The danged liar just as much as told me that you had the key. Where was that padlock hid out at?"

"You must be crazy!" Rooney exclaimed. "You told me about that big padlock; that's all I know about it. What has happened?"

"Plenty," Cassidy grunted. "D'yuh mean to tell me that yuh don't know

that the padlock is back on the jail door?"

"I certainly don't! I took a chance on going away for a few minutes."

"Yeh! Yuh went to send telegrams. And looky what happened. Somebody slipped that padlock on the door while yuh was gone."

"Are the judge and the marshal still in the jail?"

"Uh! Well, I know the marshal's there. I reckon the judge and the others still is, too."

"And they're locked in with that padlock? That's surely Ezra Skinner's work. It might be worse."

"Yuh danged fool! It *couldn't* be worse. Me and a friend of mine's got a dozen more prisoners in one bunch right in front of the jail, right now, and we can't get 'em intuh the jail because that danged padlock stops us."

"You have? Really?"

"Yuh betcha we have!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" Rooney chuckled. "A whole dozen. Twelve at once?"

"Damn yuh, yes! Tha's what I said. Twice six! Twelve! D'yuh understand now? And we can't get 'em intuh the jail!"

"Sufferin' sassafras!" Rooney laughed until he bent double.

"There ain't nothin' funny about it!" severely.

"Ha-ha-ha! You—ha—you—you're excruciatingly funny. Twelve of them, you say? In *one* bunch?"

"Dang yuh! Tha's what I said. And we was gonna go out and get some more, in bunches!"

"You—aw, shut up! You'll kill me yet, with all this funny stuff."

"I'd like tuh kill yuh right now—with this funny Colt," snapped Cassidy. "I'm gettin' tempted more every minute. Le's get back to the jail."

They hastened back along one side of the plaza.

"Yuh got the key?" Blazes inquired. He still sat on the step menacing the prisoners with his Colt.

"Naw! The marshal's still got it," Cassidy answered.

"He's been astin' a lottuh questions uh these hombres here," said Blazes. "He's been astin' about coal oil. He didn't believe 'em at first when they said they didn't see no can of coal oil under thuh window. Then all of 'em inside thuh jail started chewin' thuh fat. They got to argufyin' 'bout somepin'. Wha's thuh joke about coal oil?"

"I chucked a bluff about burnin' down the jail if they hollered."

"Le's burn it down anyway," Blazes suggested hopefully. "Then we can fan outuh town with thuh knowledge that we done a good job. This town ain't gonnuh be safe for us. Take a look around. You'll see a lottuh siftin' uh men from outuh one saloon and intuh the next. They stops to take long looks over here. I figger that they stops to take long drinks while they talks it over. I know this town; there's war medicine bein' brewed. Yuh got thuh chiefs in thuh jail; tha's thuh only reason thuh war ain't started already. I sure know this town. There can be a massacre in thuh night, and in thuh mornin' they go around lookin' innercent. There won't be no signs of the massacre left, and nobody'll know nothin' about it—if yuh ast 'em."

"Well," said Cassidy, "I reckon we oughta get thuh key from the marshal and put these prisoners where they belong."

"Tha's fine!" said Blazes. "I'd take a lotta joy in shootin' thuh marshal jest to let yuh get thuh key from his corpse. Honest to gosh, I would! But how'nell we gonnuh get to him? Answer that, hey? He's in jail and has got thuh jail key. And that big padlock up there can't be jarred loose with anythin' short of dynamite. Yuh go ahead and figger it out for yourself. I've quit tryin' to figger."

"Uh!" Cassidy grunted painfully.

"And," Blazes continued, "if yuh'll take notice yuh'll notice that there ain't no more music bein' played. Tha's sure a bad sign. I'm tellin' yuh, we better light a shuck outuh town and fan thuh wind, till we meets up with the boys from the C-Bar-4."

"Maybe you're right," Cassidy admitted grudgingly. "But I sure plumb hate to quit, after the good start we got. Right there in the jail we got Hogan and Judge Gonzales—damn him—and Domingo Gallo—he's wuth *two* damns—and some of their, uh, saddle-ites."

"Whut's a saddle-ite?" inquired Blazes.

"He's a man who rides behind with yuh. Now, I leave it to yuh, Blazes, if this ain't a lulu of a night's work?"

"She is. But whut good's it gonnuh do yuh?"

"Tha's just it. If we goes away, Hogan'll pass the key out through the bars and somebody'll open that padlock."

"Shucks!" Cassidy exclaimed in disgust. "I'd oughta thought of that before." He walked over and stood near Blazes.

"Thought uh whut?" Blazes wanted to know.

"Jimmin' this lock so's it won't open. You and Rooney keep your guns on those hombres yuh got lined up in front. Leave this job to me."

At close range, the thin moonlight sufficed to reveal clearly the large keyhole in the huge padlock. Cassidy brought the muzzle of his Colt within a foot of the lock. He carefully and deliberately aimed at the keyhole. Three times he fired, and each shot sent a .44-40 bullet—200 grains of lead—to spatter through the internal anatomy of the lock. Carefully he examined the result. He chuckled.

"She's sure locked now. No key can turn in it. She's just about plumb sealed up."

"Tha's fine! Yuh better fan yuhself around a corner of thuh jail and gather up thuh first three hosses yuh see. Bring 'em tuh the back of thuh jail. Then we'll hit thuh wind along thuh trail till we meets up with thuh boys."

"But I cannot ride a fast horse," Rooney put in.

"Did yuh ever try it?"

"No, I——"

"Then how do yuh know yuh can't?" Blazes grinned. "Yuh'd be surprised whut yuh can do when yuh jest nat'ch'ly haftuh. If yuh fall off, yuh wantuh crawl intuh the bresh and stay there. We'll rescue yuh later. The main thing is tuh get outuh town."

Chapter IX

HISSING LEAD

CASSIDY was grinning as he started out to get some horses. He disliked very much the idea of fleeing, even temporarily, from Tres Pecos, but on the other hand he realized that it was the only sensible thing to do. His grin was caused by two mental pictures; one of Rooney trying to ride; the other of the Tres Pecos citizens trying to open the padlock.

"Hey, wait a minute," said Blazes. "Mebbe yuh don't savvy that thuh only reason we ain't had bullets buzzin' around us already is because of thuh dozen gents we got out in front here. Make 'em all sit down. Then I can look over their heads and see better whut's goin' on. And, besides, if they're sittin' down they won't be ready to scatter like a bunch of grouse. Hit 'em on thuh heads if they don't sit. Hit 'em with thuh Colt."

"Sit down!" Cassidy ordered them. Half of them immediately squatted. Cassidy shifted his gun to his left hand and advanced. "I won't hit yuh with the gun," he said. "I didn't do so well on Gallo with my fist. I can hit harder than that. I'm gonna prove it on any hombre who stands up to me." They all sat down.

"Yuh're a danged liar," said Blazes, laughing. "Yuh never did before, and yuh can't again, hit nobody harder than yuh hit Gallo. But *they* sure believed yuh. I don't. That was the wallopin'est wallop I ever seen!"

"Sure I can hit harder than that," said Cassidy. "But," he added, "I don't wanta. My knuckles says to me, 'Don't do that again, Slivers!'" Cassidy started away, but stopped to listen.

Domingo Gallo had recovered consciousness. From the jail window his voice shrieked out. He warned the town that "El Diablo Cassidy" was setting out to steal horses. He commanded the citizens to surround the jail. He was yelling out some more orders when Cassidy nonchalantly cut loose with his Colt. The bullet struck one of the iron bars in the window. It glanced off and made a half-inch nick in Gallo's right ear. There was an immediate change in Gallo's tone. He ducked his head, and, after a momentary break during which he ascertained that he was still alive and able to yell, he continued to shout frantic orders from below the level of the window ledge.

"Golly, Blazes," said Cassidy. "I hate to get scared; but maybe we better take to the chaparral."

"No, not on foot!" Blazes was firm. "When I hit thuh wind outuh Tres Pecos, I does it on hossback."

"Or in a coffin," Cassidy interjected. "You started this idea of lightin' a shuck outa here. Le's go, right now. I'm plumb willin'."

"They won't waste no coffins on us," Blazes retorted. "I'm gonnuh sit right here and keep these dozen gents hypnotized. They beat all tuh hell these stone walls that a felluh read to me in a book about oncet. I'll shoot thuh gizzard outuh thuh first one that tries tuh git up or crawl away. If yuh stay at one corner and Rooney stays at thuh other (providin' he kin send bullets like he sends them telegrams), I'll jest keep squattin' right here like a king on his throne and mebbe we'll be able to hold all thuh aces till daylight. There won't be no front attack, and there won't be none from thuh sides. These dozen gents right in front uh me is thuh aces we hold. Among 'em is a friend or relative of everybody in town. I'll keep 'em right under my gun as hostesses; tha's whut I'll do. I'll plant a hole that'll let thuh moonlight through any gent who makes a crooked move or who even lets out a peep."

"Tha's all right, far's it goes," said Cassidy. "But how about an attack from behind the jail?"

"Whut yuh gonnuh be at the corners for?" Blazes demanded. "If they's any attack from the rear I'm jest nat'ch'ly bump off six of these here hostesses in front of me."

"Why don'tcha tell 'em to tell their friends, or relatives, about them intentions of your'n?"

"Don't haftuh! If they know I'm here, them relatives'll know whut I'll do. I only wisht I had another Colt; then I'd bump 'em all off. Unless, uh course, some of 'em got around a corner too quick, like that thirteenth gent who got away and started all this trouble we're havin'."

"All this trouble," said Cassidy, "come of my attorney havin' the telegram habit and lettin' that padlock get back on the door."

"You're wrong! We're better off with these dozen gents out in the open in front of me where I kin get free shots at 'em."

"Golly, Blazes, we can't keep this up forever. Come daylight, and we'll be picked off one by one by rifle bullets from windows around the plaza."

"Didn't I tell yuh that I got confidence in thuh kid? I sent him to thuh C-Bar-4 to get thuh boys. I told him tuh kill his hoss, if necessary, a-gettin' tuh thuh ranch. And d'yuh know what he did?"

"I'll bite, Blazes; what did he do?"

"He took *my* hoss, dang his hide! It was a three hundred dollar hoss! Ain't that jest like a kid?"

"It sure is," grinned Cassidy. "Yuh recommend the kid awful high. I believe yuh now. If he ever wants a recommend, tell him to come to me."

"But that hoss is wuth six months' wages."

"Tell yuh what," said Cassidy, "if the kid kills your hoss we'll make Gallo pay for it. I got his whole wad in my pocket right now. I got a thousand dollars comin', but when I started countin' this wad, I quit halfway—after being sure there was more'n a thousand in it."

"Tha's fine; we'll collect outuh Gallo's money if that hoss gits ruint. Right now I wisht I had me another gun. And a drink wouldn't go bad a-tall." A grin. "Think yuh can make it over to thuh Socorro and back? Yuh might get me another gun, and mebbe use a li'l more edication than I got in selectin' bottles."

"Reckon I can do it," said Cassidy. "I can't get killed for tryin'."

"Thuh hell yuh can't! I wouldn't try it, myself. Nope! Mrs. Callahan's son wouldn't! He's satisfied tuh squat right here and hold his gun on these here hostesses."

"Callahan? I never knew rightly your last name before. Yuh must be Irish?"

"Nope. Only half. Thuh other half is sure foolish, or I wouldn't uh horned in on this private fight you're pullin' off."

"Uh! Yuh sorry yuh did?"

"Not a damned bit! I'm havin' thuh time of my life." Blazes calmly cast his gaze around the plaza. "Yuh better stay here. They's a bunch headin' down t'ards thuh Socorro."

"Yep! I betcha they're headin' for there. I better get there first." And Cassidy started off. He had never gained fame as a sprinter, but his long legs enabled him to get speed from a leaping gallop. His high heels kicked up the dust into a screen that concealed him finally from the men in front of the jail.

He was perhaps a dozen yards from the Socorro when someone recognized him. This someone was among a bunch of ten or twelve men who were about one hundred feet away. Simultaneously with the recognition a shot was fired,

then a few more. But Cassidy was no longer a target. The first shot had served to increase the length of his strides; he covered the last dozen yards in four or five galloping steps. A final leap took him within the door of the saloon. He kicked aside the rock that propped the door open. He slammed the door and bolted it. There were no doors that easily swung both ways at the entrance to the Socorro. There was only one tall narrow door that was either closed or propped open. Usually it was open.

His first hasty glance had told him that the saloon was deserted. He puffed like a freight locomotive on a long grade as he crossed the room to the bar. He selected two already opened but nearly full bottles of whisky, and carried these over to the pool table. Then he detached a reflector lamp from the wall and placed it on the table, the better to examine the guns thereon. There was one belt, its loop filled with .44's. He buckled it around his waist and then pulled the revolver from the holster. It was loaded. He shoved it back into the leather and proceeded in turn to examine each of the other guns. The first was a .45. He threw it over behind the bar. Two .38-40's followed it. So did a .41, and two more .45's.

Finally the guns on the table had been weeded down to three .44-40's. He again pulled the revolver from the holster. He placed it on the table. Then he drew his own .44 from the waistband of his overalls, briefly examined it, then shoved it down into the holster. He grinned, as one by one he tucked four long barreled .44's inside the front of the belt. He tried to bend forward, and grinned again. He picked up the two bottles of whisky and tried to tiptoe silently into the rear room. He had been in the saloon barely two minutes.

HE OPENED a rear window, listened, then cautiously stuck out his head to reconnoiter. Apparently the coast was clear. He leaped down and cautiously made his way along a dark alley. He heard a crash and the tinkle of falling glass. "Someone—somebody," Cassidy murmured with a grin, "somebody, at large expense, has done busted in the front door of the Socorro. I betcha they was lookin' for me. Let 'em look!" He stopped to pull the loose cork from a bottle. It gurgled freely.

"*Woof!* Two more drinks like that, and I'll go lookin' for them." He gained some measure of confidence by running his hand across the butts of the four guns stuck inside the front of his belt. It was comforting to have the guns, even though the carrying of them in that manner was decidedly uncomfortable.

He listened again. There sounded two shots in rapid succession. Someone yelled an order in Spanish. Cassidy hurried down to where a vacant lot enabled him to reach a point from which he could see the plaza. He saw the flash of a gun from the opposite side of the square. "Now, what tha—?" Cassidy tilted his hat forward and scratched the back of his head. He saw the burst of fire from a gun muzzle from another end of the plaza. Then another. "Now what in sky blue pink blazes is the catch in that—or them?" These are not Cassidy's exact words. "They're shootin' *high!* Shootin' almost at the stars! They's sure a catch in their doin' that, outside of their tryin' not to kill their friends and relatives what Blazes is holdin' in front of him as what he calls hostesses. *Golly!* I betcha they're gonna try to make a rush from behind the jail, both sides at once, and try to smother Blazes." Cassidy's hair prickled his scalp as he broke into a run toward the jail.

Thirty yards away from where Blazes still sat on the front step, Cassidy stopped. He dropped into a squatting position behind a watering trough. He puffed to regain his breath. Several bullets had whizzed close to him. His momentary panic had gone. He tried to think, and to assist this latter process he absently raised one of the bottles to his lips.

Plink! A stray bullet neatly knocked the bottom from the upended bottle. Cassidy's hand and lips felt the slight jar. Instinctively he pulled his head down between his shoulders. This move took his lips away from the bottle. The whisky started flowing very, very freely onto the front of his shirt. With great presence of mind he jerked his thumb down to act as a stopper. In the thin moonlight he saw what had happened; half of the bottle had been broken away.

"Now ain't that hell?" he drawled plaintively, as he gauged the remaining contents. "Mebbe three-four ounces left. I can't carry it around. Reckon I better drink it to save it." And he did. "Woof!" He shook his head and blinked.

He blinked again as he saw a dim blur, which finally turned out to be twelve or fifteen men, stealing up to the rear of the jail.

"They're comin', Blazes!" he shouted. "From behind the jail!" Cassidy fanned his Colt, turning the bullets loose as fast as he could in the general direction of the attackers. When it came to fanning a gun, Cassidy was great on speed but not much on accuracy. He flipped out five shots in perhaps two or three seconds. One man dropped. Half a dozen men started shooting at Cassidy, who squirmed around to the other side of the watering trough and came up with two Colts in his hands. He started firing hasty shots in pairs.

He failed to stop the rush; in fact, he aided its impetus. The attackers wanted to get the job over as soon as possible. These bullets whizzing by from the flank were as disconcerting as they were unexpected. Blazes leaped to the corner of the jail, just in time to have the bone of his upper right arm chipped by a bullet. His Colt dropped from his nerveless fingers. He stooped to pick it up with his left hand.

Rooney had disappeared at the first shout of warning. He had gone around the other corner of the jail. The attack seemed to be a success, momentarily. Cassidy did not dare to shoot at those in the front, for fear of hitting Blazes. And then——

"Yip-pee!" Bang-bang! Against the skyline, clearly visible to Cassidy, someone had stood up on the roof of the jail. *"Wa-hoo!" Bang-bang! "Ow-ooooo!" Bang-bang!"*

Cassidy laughed. He had to laugh or choke, as he recognized the voice of old Ezra Skinner.

"Yip-pee!" Bang-bang!"

"So that's where that bottle of whisky got emptied! And he's got the two guns I chucked up on the roof!" Cassidy laughed again, as the old man punctuated his wolf howls with revolver shots in pairs. The muzzles went skyward again. *"Hi-yee!"* Down came the guns. *Bang-bang!*

Things were happening too fast for the attackers. Blazes had stepped back behind the corner of the jail and was shooting slowly, deliberately with his left hand. Cassidy opened up with his last pair of guns. And from the rear corner was now coming the most deadly fire of all; Rooney was practicing target shooting. Each slowly spaced shot made a bull's-eye. The attorney sent each of his bullets as though they were of solid gold and encrusted with diamonds. He wasted none.

BEFORE the attacking force could do anything except fire a few hasty random shots in face of bullets coming from four directions, there were only three of them left on their feet. These three huddled together, edging toward the shadow of the jail wall, their guns flaming. *Plunk!* Old man Skinner let out another yell and leaped to the ground. *Bang!* One of the three went down. So did Skinner. One of his guns had been loaded with six shells; the other with only five.

Bang-bang! Rooney and Blazes had fired almost simultaneously. They both got the same man. The sole survivor of the attackers ran for the open. Cassidy arose and kept shooting as he ran to intercept the fugitive. Cassidy's guns finally clicked on empty shells. He stopped in disgust. "Get him, one uh yuh!" he yelped.

"How thuh hell can we?" Blazes retorted. "We're all shot out."

"Shucks! Well, ne'mind. I got a beltful of shells on me," said Cassidy. "And yuh went and lost them dozen prisoners. They scattered and flew across the plaza like a bunch of quail."

"Thuh hell with 'em!" said Blazes. "I betchuh went and got nawthin' but .44's. Yuh don't haftuh tell me. I got about twenty .45's in muh belt. Come and load my gun for me. I can't do it very fast with only one hand."

"One hand? Huh! Wait a minute." Cassidy ejected the empty shells from a Colt and started shoving loaded cartridges in the cylinder chambers as he walked back to the watering trough. Someone started shooting at him from across the plaza. A bullet *plunked* into the trough as he stooped over to recover two empty Colts and a half empty

bottle. Another man started shooting, then two more. It was getting too hot. Cassidy gathered the loot to his bosom and galloped awkwardly to the jail.

"Look whut yuh did!" Blazes complained. "Yuh went and brought a flock uh slugs over this way. Le's get behind thuh jail. It ain't safe here no more, since them pris'ners got away. Whut thuh hell kind of a arsenal did yuh have with yuh? Yuh did more shootin' and got less results in less time than ever I ever seen. I danged near took a shot at yuh when yuh was fannin' that gun. Yuh're plumb dangerous to your friends. Yuh wantuh be more careful. I got shot right here in my arm, and I betchuh, like as not, yuh're thuh hombre who gunned me up."

"G'wan!" Cassidy tried to grin, but the attempt was a failure. "Looky what I brought yuh." He held out the bottle. "And it was dangerous over where I was," he continued. "The other bottle got smashed by a hunka lead, just when I was a-drinkin' outa it, too. That's dangerous."

"Not half so dangerous as havin' you shootin' at me," said Blazes, stopping and raising the bottle to his lips.

Rooney unexpectedly arose right beside him.

"Don't do that!" Blazes snapped out. "I only got one hand that works, and I got thuh bottle in that. I danged near busted thuh bottle on your head. Yuh scared me, hoppin' up like that. Whut yuh been doin'?"

"I have been trying to discover what is wrong, or what has happened to Ezra Skinner."

"That him?" Cassidy knelt. Then, "Take a-holt under his arm. I'll take a-holt under the other. Le's drag him around behind the jail. I felt around on him, some. I didn't feel no blood. I betcha he's drunk, tha's all. The old sonovagun was up on the roof, there, alla time—and I thought I was awful foxy when I cached that other bottle up there. He put it away for keeps. He's drunk, tha's all."

"*Who's* drunk?" Skinner suddenly piped up. "I been layin' here a-grittin' my teeth from the pain—and hadda take them insults. Draggin' me thataway kinda straightened up my laig and took a lot of the pain away."

"D'yuh get shot?" Cassidy inquired solicitously.

"Hell, no!" Skinner snorted. "When I lit, after jumpin' off that roof my laig jest doubled up under me. Busted, I reckon."

"If yuh wasn't drunk, why'n'll did yuh jump, then? They wasn't no sense in that."

"Well, I thought there was when I did it. I remember that I felt like a howlin' tiger and I went down off that roof to claw and bite somebody. After I hit the ground, I—I kinda lost them ambitions. I musta fainted, or somethin'."

"Yeh, I reckon yuh did. Was yuh up on that roof alla time?"

"I went up as soon as it got dark—after I'd sent some telegrams."

"I hope yuh bust your other laig!" said Cassidy, grinning. "You and Rooney oughta marry each other. All yuh both think about is sendin' telegrams. What tha hell is telegrams gonna do us?"

"What time is it?"

"Time for Blazes to leggo that bottle," said Cassidy, grasping it firmly.

"Pull that left laig uh mine a little straighter, will yuh?" Skinner pleaded. "Then gimme that bottle for a minute. I—I reckon I must have been a li'l inebriated. But I'm sure sober now—and that laig hurts like hell."

"Sure." Cassidy passed the bottle into the eager hands. Gingerly, then, he pulled on the left leg.

Glug-glug! "For cripes sake! Can't yuh pull harder? *That* ain't doin' no good!"

"Let me do it," Rooney suggested. "I know a little about broken limbs."

"Hop to it," Cassidy said gladly, mopping his brow.

"And how about me, Slivers?" said Blazes. "This is thuh fust time I've hadduh chance to feel my arm. She's bleedin'."

"Uh! I'll get a sash to tie it up." Cassidy ran out into the open. He stopped, dodged aside and pulled his Colt as his eyes caught a glint of moonlight on moving metal. He fired, a fraction of a second ahead of the flash from the gun in the hand of a wounded Mexican cowboy. He walked up and kicked the gun away from the hand that was trying to raise it again.

"Yuh danged wildcat! Don'tcha know when yuh've had enough?" Cassidy's gaze went swiftly around. He

counted the prone forms lying within a space of perhaps twenty feet by thirty. He counted thirteen, his gun ready. Some were undoubtedly dead, some were only slightly wounded, but these neither twitched nor moaned. If they had sense enough left with which to think at all, their thoughts concentrated on playing 'possum. They knew that Cassidy was standing over them. They feared him.

CASSIDY returned, finally, with a large and gaudy silk sash, which he tore into strips and used these as bandages for Blazes' wounded arm. "How about yuh, Rooney?" he inquired. "All in one piece?"

"Ye-es. My hat got knocked off; it's ruined by a bullet. And there's a big rip in my coat right along my ribs, but I can't find that I've been wounded."

"Tha's too bad, ain't it?" grinned Cassidy. "Yuh shoulda been, the way yuh stood right out in the open. I wouldn't uh done that, myself. Don'tcha know it's dangerous?"

"Well, I didn't have time to think about that. I ran around to the rear and——"

"Yeh! Yuh sure done noble. Yuh picked 'em off at close range."

"That's just it," said Rooney; "I *had* to! I got scared every time a man turned around and faced me. I kept your advice in mind; I had been thinking about it—so I just followed it."

"What advice was that?"

"Why, for me to do target shooting—but for me to be sure to shoot before the target did. I did. I had to. I got scared when three of them turned around and ran at me at the same time. I shot one of them; then my hat flew off and I got hit in the coat, just like somebody had jerked it. I was more scared than ever, right then."

"What did yuh do?"

"Why, I shot another man. I had to."

"And then yuh shot the third one, too, huh?"

"No, I didn't. I remember that he seemed to trip on something. He fell, and stayed down. He must have been shot by you or Blazes or Skinner."

"What did yuh do then?"

"Why, I waited a second or two and then fired my last shot. I was aware all the time of the limited number of cartridges in my weapon, and I was very careful to waste none. But, all the time, I was very much scared."

"Uh!" grinned Cassidy. "Well, lemme advise yuh for my own good; don'tcha ever go and get scared of me when yuh got a gun in your hand. I'm friendly, savvy? I've gotta be. You target shooters get too scared—and deadly—to suit me. My gosh, Blazes! I wonder what he'd uh done if he hadn't been scared?"

"Say, what time is it?" Skinner piped up.

"A little after nine o'clock," Rooney answered.

"And thuh kid oughtuh be yellin' outside thuh bunkhouse pretty soon, if he ain't there by now," said Blazes.

Cassidy had been reloading the fringe of long barreled revolvers that he had stuck in the front of his belt. He gave two of them to Rooney. Then he plucked six cartridges from the loops of Blazes' belt and filled the chambers of Blazes' .45.

"Will there be another attack?" Rooney inquired.

"Hell, yes!" said Cassidy. "But for a few minutes they're pretty well kinda disorganized. And they won't rush us again. I figger they'll surround us and start snipin'. My idea is to sift outa these immediate surroundings. Le's pick Skinner up and carry him."

"No, yuh don't!" Skinner objected. "Yuh ain't gonna pack me none. Not with this leg of mine!"

"We'll try tuh get a door, or a table and turn it upside down," Cassidy suggested.

"No! I ain't goin' travelin'! C'mere. I got an idee, and I want to whisper it."

"Say it fast," said Cassidy, as they gathered around.

"That flat roof up there," said Skinner, "has got a six-inch rim on three sides. I like that roof. I want you boys to sit me on the edge of that big box. Then two of you can get up on the box, take hold of me and sit me on the edge of the roof. I don't weigh much. I'll lean back and kinda pivot around while yuh lift my bad laig up on the roof."

"We won't do that," said Cassidy. "We ain't gonna leave yuh here for them coyotes."

"Shut up and lemme finish, will yuh?" Skinner snapped out. "If yuh try to pack me along with yuh, the chances

are that we'll all be goners. I ain't goin' to let yuh pack me, nohow. Not with this laig. Well, when yuh gits me up on the roof I'll turn this busted laig sideways and then roll over on my belly. I kin inch along without making no noise till I gits away from that unprotected edge."

"Whut d'yuh thing we are?" Blazes demanded indignantly.

"Yuh betcha!" Cassidy chimed in. "Yuh——"

"Shut up, yuh brainless idjuts!" Skinner snorted. "Yuh're tryin' to spoil my scheme. Here I am a-whisperin'—and you two blank-blank—" Skinner propped himself on one elbow and raised the bottle to his mouth.

"Don't go a-spoilin' my scheme," he continued in a whisper. "I've got to git on that roof; that's all there is to it! You won't be desertin' me. Why, inside an hour or so there'll be a *trainload* of men pull in! There'll be enough of them to turn Tres Pecos inside out.

"As I was sayin', I kin inch along so slow that they won't hear me down inside the jail. They're talkin' like hell, anyway. I want to hear what they're sayin'. I've got to hear what they say —*after* they realize that a special train has pulled in. I've got more evidence piled up than they'll ever git away from, but I want to hear what alibis they try to cook up, jest as a clincher. Savvy? Lemme keep what's left in this bottle. Load up them two guns of mine. Boost me onto the roof without makin' no noise in doin' it. That's all I ask."

"We'd better do what he wants," said Rooney. "He has had his campaign planned ahead."

"You bet!" whispered Skinner. "If it wasn't for this laig, I'd go up and stay on the roof, anyway."

"Le's all go up on the roof," Blazes suggested.

"And git killed!" said Skinner. "If your brains was gunpowder they wouldn't boost a bullet halfway out through a gun barrel. Yuh miss the whole idea. Put me up on the edge, before anybody gits around to the rear to see yuh do it. Then the three of yuh runs away. Savvy? Yuh carry that box with yuh. I hope they see yuh do it. They'll think you're carryin' *me*. I'll git along fine up on the roof. Nobody'll be able to look up there and see me—after yuh take that box away. Say a few things out loud while you're goin' away, so's to let them men in the jail think we've all gone. I want to hear what that crooked judge and the marshal and Domingo Gallo have to say. And gimme a couple of guns. They won't know I'm on the roof—but when I've got guns, anybody who gets boosted up to take a look is goin' to jine the angel chorus."

"Get your shoulder under his other arm, Cassidy," Rooney ordered. "We'll lift him high to keep that leg straight."

"Furgit my laig!" said Skinner. "I reckon she snapped off clean. The more I drink, the less she hurts."

THEY placed Skinner on the edge of the high box. They mounted, and lifted him again. Without a sound louder than the slither of cloth they boosted him up until he sat on the edge of the roof. He leaned back and swung around. Rooney carefully kept the broken leg pulled straight out until he had lifted it up and placed it on the roof. They leaped down.

"Be careful, Cassidy," Rooney said loudly. "This box is a hell of a thing to carry him on. But let's put a little speed into getting him away from here." They trotted away with the empty box. Blazes joined them.

"You lead the way," said Cassidy. "Where we headin' for?"

"Away," Blazes answered. "And we're danged lucky that the moon ain't whut she was a few minutes ago. We're luckier than that, take it all around. If all them mad hombres all around the plaza had someone to tell 'em whut to do, we wouldn't be gettin' clear like this. Them loud arguments they're havin' is whut's helpin' us. I hope they start shootin' each other. Who's that yellin', with a voice like a bugle?"

By this time they were over one hundred yards from the jail. Blazes had led them through the sagebrush to the bottom of a narrow draw which was free of vegetation. "Le's drop that box back there among the bresh," he suggested. " 'S no use carryin' it any more. But listen at that felluh yell. I betchuh he sings sopraner."

"Huh!" grinned Cassidy. "Tha's my li'l friend Sunday Chicken a-yellin' through the bars. How's your arm?"

"Fine as silk; that's whut she's wrapped in. How about sneakin' down this

draw and circlin' to thuh other side uh town? They won't be lookin' for us over there."

"Tha's fine; they sure won't. Le's go clear around to the other side of the railroad; then we'll be able to see that trainload of men come in. Skinner said a trainload was comin'. He musta telegraphed for a troop of cavalry. Maybe a coupla troops."

Blazes cautioned them to remain silent, then crept up the side of the draw to peer through the brush. He returned in a moment.

"They was a big bunchuh men gathered at thuh jail window," he announced. "They jest now scattered to go peltin' through thuh bresh in thuh direction we started out in. Gallo's been givin' 'em orders, I figger. We better keep moseyin' on in this half circle we started. Mebbe we better try tuh hole up in thuh railroad station. Thuh agent—he's thuh man who sends thuh telegrams—is a white man. He's a young felluh by thuh name of McNamara. And he's touchy as all hell; he don't take no orders from nobody, leastways, nobody in Tres Pecos. Somebody took a shot at him last month, I heard, and he goes around with a bunchuh chips on his shoulders. Likewise with a Colt. He don't seem tuh like nobody in Tres Pecos, but he's so danged stubborn that he won't quit his job."

"Maybe he won't like us," said Cassidy.

"Aw, yuh miss thuh point. He don't like Tres Pecos. We been raisin' hell with thuh town. When this McNamara finds out that we did the hell raisin', he'll treat us fine. Yuh betchuh!"

"Blazes undoubtedly is correct in his diagnosis," Rooney chimed in.

"G'wan! Say, Blazes, I betcha he's insultin' your nose," said Cassidy. "He means yuh got a crooked nose that smells out things that's crooked."

"Aw, it got that way when I got chucked off a hoss ontuh my face," Blazes growled. "She ustuh be a fine, straight nose."

"I mean Blazes' theory about the station agent. I mean your idea about him, Blazes. He looked at me in a very reserved, suspicious way when I wanted to send some telegrams. His manner changed after he had read the messages I scribbled out. He became almost cordial."

"Why didn't yuh say so in thuh fust place?" Blazes grinned. "Listen at 'em crashin' through thuh bresh, back there. We better git tuh movin'."

Chapter X

THE "CAVALRY"

HALF an hour later, as they squatted beneath the planks of the freight platform, they heard the wild scream of a locomotive whistle a mile or two out of town. The station had been dark when they had stolen up to it. They had decided not to risk the noise it might take to arouse the agent.

"There she comes," said Blazes. "Wonder how many head uh cavalry she's got aboard? Yuh see, Slivers, yuh gottuh be willin', like I am, tuh line up and string along with this idee uh sendin' telegrams and things like that. I was ag'in this telegram idee at fust, but now jest looky. A whole herd uh cavalry is a-comin' tuh put this danged town in thuh condition she oughtuh be in."

Again the whistle sounded, much nearer this time. The rails near them began to hum and vibrate. A beam of light glinted momentarily through the cracks of the side planks of the platform. The beam wavered and finally settled down to illumine the rails as the locomotive scurried around a small curve and settled down to business on the final straight line of track that led into Tres Pecos.

"Le's go out and meet the troops," Cassidy suggested. "That train's gonna stop here in two shakes less than nawthin'." He started crawling out from beneath the platform.

Cassidy's estimate of time was more or less correct, for he had barely arisen to his feet before the locomotive, with ear splitting screeches of its wheels, stopped within a few feet of him. Even before the engine had halted, Cassidy thought that something was wrong. "Where's the cars?" he wondered, as he leaned sideways to get a better view and make certain that his first impression had been correct. There were no cars. The whole train consisted of one locomotive and its tender.

One by one, four men leaped down from the cab. They stood in a group for a moment, evidently looking around

and listening. Four pairs of eyes finally centered on Cassidy.

"Where's Ezra Skinner?" one of the men inquired.

"Where's Rooney?" another wanted to know. They advanced.

"Right here," the attorney answered, as he started to meet the newcomers. "Glad you got here so soon, Jake."

"Hey, where's your hosses?" Cassidy queried, tilting his hat forward and scratching the back of his head in a bewildered way.

"Horses?"

"Sure! That's what I said—*hosses!*"

Rooney laughed. "Boys, this is Slivers Cassidy. In his imagination he built a picture of a cavalry troop coming to town. He didn't even stop at that; he finally pictured *two* troops!"

Blazes, handicapped by having only one good arm, had finally managed to crawl out from beneath the platform. Rooney introduced him.

"Looky here, Rooney!" Cassidy blurted out. "It's Jake and Dan and Harry and George. They're your friends—but who the hell are they? They must be *good*—if they can take the place of a trainload of cavalry, like Skinner promised was comin'."

Rooney laughed again. "Oh, Jake, here, is Skinner's boss. Dan is only a full fledged United States marshal. Harry is the sheriff of this county, and George is his deputy."

"Uh!" grunted Cassidy, after awkwardly acknowledging the introductions. "I hope to hell you boys brought your hardware with yuh."

Slup! A window went up. "What's going on out there?" came a harsh voice.

"That's McNamara," said Blazes.

"You bet it is, and he's got you covered!" said the agent. "Talk fast! Who are you?"

"The sheriff has arrived," Rooney answered.

"It's about time!" said McNamara. "One window here got busted by a stray bullet, and if there was any more shooting going on around the depot I was going to do it. Come on in here if you want to talk. It'll be safer. There seems to have been hell popping, and I'm betting that there'll be more."

"What makes you think so?" Rooney inquired.

"The wires have been cut! They were cut a few minutes after I sent your messages through. That meant war, so I holed up and got ready for it." The agent unbarred the door and stepped out. He had a Colt in his hand as he looked over the group of men. "Where's Skinner?" he inquired.

Rooney quickly told him the situation. McNamara walked to where the engineer was leaning out of the cab window. "Oh, hello, Ben! You better highball out of here. Run down to San Ignacio. The wire'll be open from there. Wire D. H. that company property, likewise me, is in danger. Savvy?"

"WHAT I'm tryin' to find out," the sheriff cut in ponderously, "what I want to find out is what's been goin' on here. I want to know!"

"Boys," said McNamara, "the sheriff wants to know. I'd like to know a few things, myself. Come on inside."

The eight men filed into the gloom of the waiting room. Some of them sat down on a bench, after they had stumbled over it. Rooney talked fast, rapidly sketching what had taken place.

"I want to know what authority this Cassidy had for making those arrests?" the sheriff finally broke in.

"Shut up, Harry!" the U. S. marshal ordered. "Go on, Rooney."

"He didn't have any authority; he didn't have any warrant; he had no right to go out and throw innocent citizens in the jug, thataway!" the sheriff persisted ponderously.

"Looky here, Sheriff!" Blazes exclaimed. "I'm gettin' mad! I've heard jest about enough outuh yuh! My right arm is on the bum, but that won't stop me none from tryin' tuh pound some sense intuh your fat and thick haid."

"But he had no—" the sheriff began.

"Shut up!" Blazes' tone was sharp and vicious. "I got yuh located jest right. One more word——"

"And yuh won't do nawthin'," said Cassidy. "Yuh can't, because there won't be nawthin' left to do. Not after I wallop him first."

"Here, here, boys," the marshal briskly interrupted as he stepped in front of the sheriff. "This won't do. Harry is jealous because you seem to have gone over his head in doing the right thing."

"But they've locked up Judge Gon-

zales and Marshal Hogan!" the sheriff spluttered. "*They* represented the law! They——"

"Shut up and listen, Harry!" said the marshal. "I want to hear what Rooney has to say. And if you don't shut up, I'll have Cassidy and his friend mad at me because I'm sure tempted right now to hit you before either of them can. Proceed, Rooney."

"And while I was sending some telegrams," Rooney continued, "Cassidy and Blazes brought *twelve* prisoners, in one bunch, to the jail door. But they discovered that the padlock had mysteriously been snapped over the eyebolts. We were in trouble then. We didn't know what to do with the prisoners. We——"

Rooney finished his sketch of events. The sheriff was swallowing his thoughts. Everybody else was grinning, more or less.

"And Skinner is now down on the jail roof?" the marshal said slowly. "And he has a broken leg? I wonder if he is in danger?"

"I figger he ain't," said Cassidy. "There ain't been a shot fired for over half an hour. Maybe an hour."

"I understand," propounded the secretary of the Southwestern Cattlemen's Association, "that Ez Skinner approved of these arrests you made."

"They were not arrests!" interjected the sheriff. "They were outrages!"

"Listen, Mr. Sheriff," said Blazes, breathing hard through his nostrils, "how'n 'ell do yuh know *whut* they are? Yuh ain't been down here since before thuh last election. I figgers that you're either crazy or crooked. One more crack outuh yuh and I'll be astin' how much yuh're gettin' paid to stay away."

There was a moment of heavy silence.

"Yeh, Sheriff," said Cassidy. "I never thought about that before, but she sure looks funny when yuh think it over."

"Aw, he's honest as hell," the deputy sheriff broke in. "But Tres Pecos has been a good town lately—on the surface. Harry ain't had no call to come down here. Just remember that Tres Pecos is seventy miles from the county seat, where a sheriff is s'posed to be when somebody wants him."

"There's somepin' in that, too," agreed Cassidy.

"And yuh better come down from your high hoss, Harry," the deputy continued. "Yuh see," he explained to the others, "Harry takes his job seriously; he's jealous of it, like the marshal said, and he likes to give out authority himself. He don't like for nobody to take it out of his hands without his givin' it first."

"Did Ez Skinner approve of those arrests?" the secretary repeated.

"He sure must," said Cassidy. "Why else did he put that padlock back on the door so's to make sure that them hombres would stay in jail? Answer me that, huh?"

"Cassidy seems to have covered the ground," Rooney chimed in.

"Well," the secretary repeated, "I'm backin' Ez Skinner's play to the limit. I have faith in him. He fools most folks, but he ain't no fool. He's wiser than a treeful of owls. He not only fools people, but he makes fools out of them. He makes me tear my hair sometimes, but that's only because he's too deep for me to figure."

"He sure can't move much now, not with that busted laig," said Cassidy. "I'm thinkin' that we oughta do somepin'. We oughta get a doctor to fix that laig up."

"This is a nice restful place tuh wait in," said Blazes. "I don't know how long she'll remain peaceable around here, but I hope she stays that way. I feel plumb peaceable since I got my best arm all messed up so's it's useless. There's seven and a half men here now, me bein' figgered as half with this bum arm. We can't do nothin', nohow—not against thuh gang of maybe thirty or forty hombres, all half drunk—that's fightin' for Gallo. And I betchuh that pretty soon they'll try tuh file that lock off'n thuh jail door."

"They'll have a sweet job," said the deputy. "That big padlock was made to order out of first class steel."

"Now see here," the sheriff broke in, "the situation here looks utterly impossible to me. There must be at least a few honest men in Tres Pecos!"

"There's lots of 'em," said Blazes. "There may be a dozen, maybe twenty—and there might be a hunderd. But they're in their beds right now, with no lights lit. And why are they there? I'll tell yuh why. They're there because they wantuh keep on livin' in this town.

They don't wantuh git a knife or a hunka lead in their backs, and that's jest whut they're liable to git if they horn in against Gallo. That baby faced li'l Mex has gottuh flock of murderers tuh carry out his orders. He keeps this town lookin' danged decent—in thuh daytime. And yuh can't prove nothin'. His enemies simply disappear, tha's all. One day they're here; thuh next day they ain't. They have dropped outuh sight, and they never show up again. Tha's why thuh people who live here are afraid tuh fight Gallo."

"Can any of this be proved?" the marshal inquired.

"Didn't I jest now say it couldn't?" said Blazes.

"This agrees with what Ez Skinner has reported," the secretary broke in. "I wonder where Bill Standish is?"

"Who's he?" Cassidy inquired.

"He's the brand inspector that the association has stationed in this district."

"Yuh ain't told nothin'," Blazes chuckled. "That tough and wise old jasper has sure made himself plumb unnecessary to Gallo. Gallo's murderers are layin' for him, 'cause Gallo ain't been able to ship by rail anything from below thuh line since Bill Standish come on thuh job."

"I know where to send word to him when any stock is to be shipped out of here on this railroad," said the agent. "And, Mr. Sheriff, I want to tell you right now that I've had money offered me to forget to notify Standish when a shipment is going out. I didn't take the money, Mr. Sheriff—and, well, I pack a gun now. I've been shot at once. That was enough. That's why I stuck all of you up on the platform. I reserve the right to shoot first when anybody comes around here at night."

"Yuh won't see old Bill Standish around Tres Pecos at night," said Blazes. "He's spent many a night at thuh C-Bar-4. He's allus pesterin' around. He spends lots uh nights looking for whut he calls noxturnal activities in his district. I reckon that means that he's lookin' for a good poker game to horn intuh."

FROM just outside the door sounded a mingled snort and repressed laugh. "Don't shoot, gents! This is old Bill Standish, the gent who goes lookin' for 'noxturnal' activities. I heard a rumor—meanin' the faint shots on the wind—that yuh been havin' some of them kind of activities here tonight."

Standish entered. If someone had struck a match he would have seen a mahogany hued face, wrinkled and creased, behind a drooping gray mustache, and a pair of shrewd-innocent blue eyes which now expressed much mirth.

"I been workin', gents," he continued before anybody else could speak. "Are yuh here, Ez?"

"No," Rooney explained. "Skinner is down on the roof of the jail. He's safe, as long as we don't hear any shots."

"Who are you? Who else is here?"

Rooney spoke again. He talked fast and sketched events.

"Well, I'm sure glad the boss is here," said Standish. "This morning, on Skinner's sayso, me and a couple of boys took them forty cows out of the corral. I was told that Cassidy had bought them from Gallo. That Scorpion brand looked all right, and then again it didn't. We hazed them cows ten miles north to a little canyon where we could keep them corraled. I had a peculiar thing happen. I had my gun in my hand and it was pointed right between the eyes of one of them cows. And, d'yuh know, that danged gun went off! Yep, it was a bad accident. Killed that cow plumb dead. So we skinned off that brand to take a look from the inside." Standish was enjoying himself. He paused, to give someone a chance to ask a question.

"Well, go on," said the secretary. "What did you discover?"

"Nothin' much, boss. Only that Scorpion cow used to be a Bar-O-Bar. A slick job of blottin'. And them cows have been kept down in Mexico till the blottin' job had peeled and got haired over till it looked pumb natural—from the outside. It sure was a slick job. It sort of fooled my eyes, but it didn't fool my suspicions. That's what made me so careless with the gun—my suspicions. We got the goods on Gallo, if we can prove that he sold them to Cassidy."

"That's easy!" Rooney chirped triumphantly. "I've got the bill of sale right here."

"Give it here!" the secretary ordered.

"It's so precious that I'm going to hide it inside my shoe. So far, so good—but how about Ez Skinner who is tied on the jail roof with a broken leg? We ought to rescue him."

"Don't try it yet," said Cassidy. "He won't appreciate it. We wanted to carry him along with us, but we only got insulted because we wanted to do it. He's stubborn. When he's got a idea, he hangs on to it like it was worth a million dollars."

"I know," smiled the secretary. "You can't shake one of his ideas with an earthquake."

"Say," the deputy interrupted, "that's all fine about the padlock bein' on the door; but who's got the key to the padlock?"

"I am sure that marshal, Hogan, still has it," Rooney answered. The darkness concealed his grin.

"Then you're a bunch of fools!" the deputy snapped out. "He'll pass the key through the bars and——"

"Haw-haw-haw!" snorted Cassidy. Blazes joined in. Rooney snickered.

"Yes, you're right," Rooney agreed in a grave tone. "Undoubtedly, Mr. Hogan will be able to slip his hand through the bars and give the key to someone——"

"Yes, that's just what I feared," the deputy began.

"Aw, quit joshin' him, Rooney," said Cassidy. "Mr. Depity, I sure admire a man who can do some straight up and down thinkin'. I sure do. Yuh thunk up that catch in it right away. It took me a hell of a long time to do it. But after I did, I plunked three slugs from my gun right smack into the keyhole of that lock. She's plugged fine. So quit worryin'."

"Gents," said Bill Standish, "if yuh'll excuse me, I'll excuse myself and light a shuck out of here before it's too late. I'm goin' out and tell some of the decent citizens of this town that the showdown has come, and that they better buckle on their shootin' irons and get in on it." Mr. Standish quietly departed.

And about one minute later, there came a hail from the platform, "Hey, Blazes?"

"Tha's Peck Powell," said Blazes, going to the door to answer the hail. Two cowboys entered, the tinkle of spur rowells mingling with the slither of their leather chaps. They were from the C-Bar-4, and had arrived in town earlier in the evening with Blazes and the kid.

"Hello, Peck," said Cassidy.

"Huh!" grunted Peck in peevish tone. "I reckon that's you, Slivers. You're sure selfish, the way you and Blazes herd up and hog all the fun. Me and Browny, here, has been out tryin' to horn in on the festivities, but we didn't know what end to horn in on. We just now run into Standish. Where's the kid?"

"Oh, I sent him home tuh git the rest of thuh boys," Blazes answered. "I done told him tuh kill his hoss a-gittin' there—and whut d'yuh think he did?"

"That's easy," said Peck. "I betcha he took *your* hoss! Gimme a hard one. I know the kid's idea of doin' things right."

"You win!" grinned Blazes. "Tha's jest whut he done, the li'l sonovagun."

"What's the general idea of everything?" the other newcomer, Browny, inquired.

"Now, see here, Browny, we're gettin' danged tired uh tellin' thuh same yarn. Jest take my word for it, an' string along."

"Tha's enough for me," said Browny.

"Me, too," said Peck Powell. "Only I hope all the fun ain't all over for the night. Bill Standish told us it wasn't liable to be."

"Bill's right—but I hope he's wrong," said Blazes. "And my right arm got shot up so's she's wrong. I sure got a crippled wing."

"Which makes it match your brain," Peck assured him. "What do we do next?"

"Pray for rain," said Blazes. "Tha's whut we allus do when times is tough. I feel tough, but I don't feel like huntin' for trouble any more tonight. I allus was a rotten shot with my left hand, anyway. The rest of yuh can do whut yuh like, but I'd like tuh stay holed up right here till thuh boys git here. This arm hurts and I feel awful tired."

"I feel restless," said Cassidy. "I'm gonna mosey down and see what they're tryin' to do with that jail."

"I'll go with you," the marshal offered.

"You can go—but not with me. Yuh mighta noticed, if yuh ever went scoutin', that two men always makes ten

times more noise and are ten times more noticeable than one man alone. Well, that silent one man alone is gonna be me. So long!"

CASSIDY walked around to a dark corner of the depot, where he stopped momentarily to listen. Then he made his way toward the dark mouth of an alley. The alley seemed to be deserted, so he slipped down it like a prowling cat. He had one desire and one fear. The desire was to get another drink; the fear was that something might have happened to Ezra Skinner. To gratify the desire, Cassidy got the bright idea of invading the Socorro Saloon. It probably would be deserted, and he could enter, without being seen, through the open window in the rear room. He heard a confused murmur of argumentative voices from somewhere out on the plaza. There sounded a low command. It was repeated. Someone had shouted an order for the searchers to give up the hunt and return from the brushy territory behind the jail.

Cassidy grinned, then pawed around until he had found a stack of empty beer kegs at the rear of the Socorro. He carried one to the rear window and placed it on the ground. He stepped up onto the keg, placed his elbows on the window ledge and started to hoist himself so that he could hook one leg inside the opening.

Something poked him in the ribs, an unmistakable, hard, round something. He knew it was a gun muzzle. He froze, with his elbows supporting his weight. Slowly, fearfully, he screwed his head around until he saw standing on the ground below him, the dark blur of the man who had stuck him up. He saw the rigid arm which was holding the gun against his ribs.

"Ease yourself down, slow!" came a low voiced command.

"My Gawd, Standish, is that you?" Cassidy inquired.

"That don't matter! Who are you?"

"Cassidy."

The gun muzzle came away from Cassidy's ribs. He heard a chuckle. "Come on down," said Standish. "I didn't know who you were. How could I? I ain't never had a look at you. I only heard your voice in the dark over at the depot."

"Why'd yuh stick me up?"

"Because I thought you were on your way to the meetin', through the back way. What in hell were yuh tryin' to get into the Socorro for? I reckon yuh don't know that in about one minute the Socorro will be full of Mexicans who work for Gallo—and everybody else who works for him or *is* for him. They've given up lookin' for you and Rooney and Blazes out in the brush. They can't get the jail open with Hogan's key, so they're coming to the Socorro to have a drink and talk things over."

"Tha's what I was goin' into the Socorro to get—a drink," said Cassidy. "And I sure was talkin' to myself when yuh stuck that gun into my short ribs. I was danged near prayin'. I still don't know why yuh stuck me up."

"That was partly on general principles. I happened to come around the corner and saw yuh ras'lin that beer kaig. I watched yuh. And I finally says to myself, 'I'll just take this hombre around to the depot. Maybe we can squeeze some information out of him—if he's got any. And leastways, he'll be one less that we may have to fight.'"

"Yuh thought I was a Mex, huh? Well, yuh gotta learn a lot! One Mex ain't gonna do yuh no good a-tall. Why, me and Blazes caught a whole dozen of 'em in one bunch—for all the good it done us." Cassidy stopped to listen.

From out in front had again come that loud shout. Again everybody was commanded to come to the Socorro.

"Uh!" Cassidy grunted. "I betcha if I had a drink I'd get a real idea. But yuh scared me so bad that mebbe it'll take two or three drinks to get results, now."

"I have an idea, myself," said Standish. "I don't like unnecessary shootin' and killin'. I'm goin' to stop it."

"Tha's fine," Cassidy said enthusiastically. "I'm sure with yuh on that. I don't like this shootin', myself. It's dangerous. No foolin', it is. Whatcha gonna do, poison 'em or touch off a box of dynamite under the Socorro after they all gets in there?"

"Neither," said Standish, grinning. He paused to listen to the scuffle, clatter and excited arguments as many men crowded in through the front door of the saloon.

Cassidy tilted his hat down over his

eyebrows and scratched the back of his head. "I pass," he said. "Them was the safest and most deadly ways I could think up offhand. If yuh can beat 'em, your idea sure must be a lulu. What yuh gonna do?"

"I'm goin' in and reason with 'em. I'll point out that the sheriff has arrived, along with the U. S. marshal. I'll tell 'em that if they resist the marshal, old Uncle Sam will step in heavy with a young army. They'll think that over, and they'll be good."

"Yeh, that sure sounds fine," Cassidy agreed. He sidled nearer Standish. "How many words do yuh figger they'll let yuh say before somebody who don't like yuh just pulls and plugs yuh? They don't like yuh in this town, anyway. You know they don't."

"Granted. But they'll listen, and my words will make them think."

Cassidy edged a little nearer. "Listen, some of them hombres ain't gonna think; they're gonna *shoot!* I sure admire your nerve, but I ain't admirin' your judgment. A hell of a lot they'll be impressed about what Uncle Sam'll do. Oh, less'n that, with the border so danged handy to slip across. Was yuh figgerin' on goin' in alone?" Cassidy holstered his Colt, to leave both hands free.

"Yes, I'll go alone. That's the only way to prevent more bloodshed."

"Listen, Standish; I wouldn't do that; it's too danged dangerous."

"Aw, I know what I'm doin'."

"Oh, gosh, if I must, I reckon I must——"

"What? Go with me?"

"Well, not exactly—" Cassidy swiftly seized the stock inspector's gun and tore it away. He put out his left hand and held the irate man at arm's length. "Just a minute—lis-sun!" Cassidy grinned as he waved Standish's gun aloft.

"This is what yuh might call a small rehearsal, savvy! You'll listen to me because yuh just nat'chly gotta. There's somethin' in your idea, but yuh wanted to take too danged many chances. I'll let yuh go in there and make your speech. Yuh betcha! I'm bettin' yuh'll favor the idea I just now got. I kinda like yuh; tha's why I'm stoppin' yuh from committin' suicide."

"Well," snapped Standish, "I want to hear your idea, not a lot of words."

"Uh! 'Scuse me. You're listenin' because I got the drop on you, savvy. Well, tha's the safest and best way for yuh to make your speech. We'll get all the boys who's down at the depot; we'll surround this saloon, and we'll let them inside know that we'll raise eleven kinds uh fancy hell if they start any shootin'."

"It would help—some," Standish admitted.

"Huh! Why, I betcha when we get 'em penned we can keep 'em there. Yuh betcha! Looky at this back window. If I was inside and wanted to get out—and I knowed you was squattin' down in the dark shadows against the building, ready to shoot the minute I jumped out—d'yuh think I'd take a chance? With you squattin' in the shadow and having the first shot when I exposed myself against the skyline? Uh-uh! Nope! Not me! I'd stay in there. Maybe I'd try to reach out through the window and pot yuh; but what chances would I have? Not much or many!"

"How many men are down at the depot? I didn't get to tally 'em in the dark."

"Well, there was eight of us. You made nine. Peck Powell and Browny make eleven, includin' me. Shucks! The war is over. Us eleven outside can intimigate and put the fear of the devil into all the men that can crowd into the Socorro. Them windows in front is high up. The front door is narrow. There's only two narrow side windows. Then here in the back is only this window and that door there." Cassidy walked over to run his fingers along the side of the door.

"She's got a knob," he announced. "And she opens t'ords the inside. Rustle up a rope somewheres, Standish, chuck a loop around the knob, then tie that rope to a post uh the corral acrost the alley. And while you're doin' that, I'll be hittin' the high spots for the depot. S'long!" Cassidy disappeared in the gloom of the alley.

Chapter XI

THIRTY-NINE COWS—MEX

BILL STANDISH had just finished taking in the slack of rope he had fastened to the doorknob when he heard the scuffle of many feet coming down the alley. Bill methodically heaved on the rope to draw it tight.

He made it fast, just as Cassidy arrived at the head of the parade.

"How many of yuh?" Bill inquired, whispering.

"Nine—and me. Makin' ten," said Cassidy.

"Tally!" said Standish. "Me and the sheriff will stay in back, here. The depity and one man can hold the side windows. You, Cassidy, and the marshal will take the rest of the men to hold the front door and the front windows. That's where they might try to bust out."

The fourth side of the saloon had been built against the brick wall of a grocery store.

"Shucks!" said Cassidy in disgust. "Alla time I was thinkin' that you was comin' around front to make a speech. Whatchuh gonna do? Make me make it? Well, I won't! That's flat; It was your idea. You've just nat'chly gotta do it. It's too dangerous a job for a felluh with a weak heart like me. I can't make no speech, nohow."

"Don't worry," Standish told him, grinning. "I changed my scheme, that's all. I'm goin' in through this back window and make my speech from the door of this back room. The effect'll be better that way, with me kinda surprisin' 'em from the rear. They won't know what to think."

"Mebbe they won't think," said Cassidy. "What I'm scared of is that they'll *shoot!*"

"Let 'em!" Standish grunted. "At the first move of anybody for a gun I won't be there no more. I'll slam that door and jump back out through this window again."

"Why didn't yuh say so in the first place? Yuh had me worried."

"Remember, boys," said Standish, "the closer you stand against the wall the better; you can't be shot from inside the saloon, and you'll be in a position to cut loose at anything or anybody that shows up. We'll have all the advantage. Shoot to protect yourselves, not otherwise."

"Huh!" Cassidy demanded. "S'pose they make a rush all at once to try to get out that front door?"

"Then they'll be out of luck. I said to protect yourselves."

"We sure will," said Cassidy. "Come on, boys."

About one minute later, Bill Standish opened the door that led from the dark rear room to the saloon. He stood there quietly for a moment, his left hand, palm forward, raised high. Several men saw him. They froze in surprise. One of them spoke a brief word. The thirty-six men in the saloon all turned to stare at the stock inspector.

"Don't try to shoot me," Standish began. "I am here to save your lives. The sheriff and the United States marshal have arrived with a big posse. They have surrounded the three sides of this saloon." Standish paused.

Cassidy and the marshal, taking advantage of the attention concentrated on Standish, and wishing to hear Bill's speech, had stuck their heads in through the front door.

"And if yuh don't believe Standish," Cassidy told them loudly, "I got the marshal right here to prove it."

Thirty-six heads turned hastily toward the front door.

Bang! A rash vaquero cut loose with his Colt at Cassidy's head. But Cassidy had seen the movement. So had the marshal. They discreetly and very, very hastily ducked back behind their respective sides of the doorway.

"That was foolish!" yelled Bill Standish. "You'd better——"

Bam! Wham-bang! Three quick shots had been taken at Standish—or, rather, at the door to the rear room. Standish had seen enough. He established a local record for getting out through a window. And the window, fortunately, was not in line with the door and the men who had fired the shots. A few rash, bold or desperate spirits attempted to escape from the saloon. Three of them dashed into the back room. One of them stuck his head out of the rear window. A bullet from the sheriff's gun left this man draped across the ledge. The other two immediately decided that the vicinity of the window was unhealthy. Another pair tried the rear door, but discovered that it could not be opened. One man smashed a side window with the muzzle of his Colt. Three or four quick shots from outside knocked away the remaining glass and convinced this man and nearly everybody else in the room that the experiment at the side window was a failure.

The boldest attempt to escape happened at the front door. A Mexican

who was wanted on a murder charge sprinted across the room and leaped through the doorway, with the hope of getting away on sheer momentum and speed. But his shadow went ahead of him through the doorway, warning Cassidy and the marshal. They both cut loose, from either side, forgetting in their haste the danger of shooting each other. But the sprinter stopped both bullets. His legs buckled beneath him. His momentum carried him ten feet in a sprawling skid. He lay crumpled in the dust, an object lesson revealed to those within by the thin beam of light coming out through the door. Several men had started to follow him, but they had quickly changed their minds.

"Señores, I surrender!" came a voice from within.

"Yuh can't do it!" Cassidy answered, grinning across the doorway at the marshal. He grinned even more as he listened to the quarrel that the would-be surrenderer had started.

"Hey in there!" Cassidy yelled. "Ain't any more of yuh gonna try tuh come out?" His cheerfulness was alarming to those within. And in his voice they thought they detected a note of disappointment at the fact that apparently no more men seemed to want to commit suicide by rushing out through the door. This was even more alarming to the panicky garrison.

"Throw out your guns, if you want to surrender," the marshal shouted. But no guns were thrown out. Another debate was in progress, lively, profane and with every argument falling flat against the fact that every man who had tried to escape had been very promptly shot very dead. The United States marshal and the sheriff? One man had recognized the marshal in the doorway. This was the man who had been willing to surrender. He had been properly impressed. He argued that there was no telling how large the posse might be. It must be very large indeed. How else could Señor Cassidy be so confident?

But all the men who were willing to fight for Gallo were not in the saloon. To be sure, many lay dead or wounded around the jail, but there were others. Eight of these came one at a time or in pairs. Some came boldly; some stole up toward the Socorro as though they feared a trap. But all of them were promptly stuck up and disarmed by the men who discreetly squatted against the outer walls of the saloon.

And mingled with these had arrived other men. The owner of the brick store adjacent to the Socorro had appeared. He had carried a repeating Henry rifle and a large sized doubt. When he learned the situation—after having had a Colt stuck in his face and his rifle taken away before he had been recognized—his doubt had turned to joy. He asked nothing more than the privilege of standing sixty feet out in the plaza and shooting through the open door at anything that moved within the saloon. The marshal vetoed this bright idea.

Bill Standish, at the rear, had gathered two more recruits. One of them owned a barn directly across the side street. He offered the barn as being stout enough to serve as a temporary prison. The offer was accepted. Eight prisoners were locked in the barn. The owner gave the padlock key to the sheriff.

The secretary of the association came around from the side to where Cassidy lounged against the wall near the front door.

"How about Ez Skinner?" the secretary inquired anxiously. "I wonder if he's all right?"

"Well, there's nawthin' like findin' out," Cassidy replied.

"I'll go with you," said Rooney, speaking from his station a few feet behind Cassidy.

"Come along," said Cassidy. He turned to the marshal. "Get that buck who wants to go on the warpath with his rifle. He can take my place here."

Cassidy and the attorney walked across the plaza. The jail was intact; the big padlock was still in place.

"Hey, Skinner!" Cassidy hailed.

There was no answer. Cassidy shouted again, with the same result.

"Golly!" he exclaimed, vaguely alarmed. "Come around to the back and gimme a boost up."

EZRA SKINNER lay on his back, his head propped up against the six-inch coping of the front wall. His right arm was stretched sideways at full length, and clasped in the fingers was the bottle. Cassidy carefully disengaged the fingers from around it and lifted the bottle; it was empty. Cassidy knelt. He discovered that Skinner was

asleep, very much asleep. A nice, quiet, restful sleep; there wasn't even the slightest hint of a snore. But his chest arose and fell regularly, which served to reassure Cassidy.

"What's happened to him?" Rooney inquired, as Cassidy dropped to the ground.

"He was taken unexpectedly drunk, I reckon," grinned Cassidy. "He finished the bottle. He's asleep. I don't blame him. If I had a busted laig, I'd probably 'a' finished the bottle, myself."

"And if you did not possess a broken leg—" grinned Rooney.

"Well, I'd 'a' probably 'a' finished it anyway. I got a good idea. Skinner is safe up there. We'll let him sleep it out. But right now you and me'll go find us a drink. My constitution is all shot to hell. I got a awful delicate nervous system."

"I'm glad you told me," Rooney chuckled. "I hadn't noticed it."

"You'd be surprised how delicate it is," said Cassidy seriously. "Le's go and h'ist a quick jolt somewhere and then go back to the boys."

And while the search was on for the important medicine for Cassidy's delicate nervous system, the gang from the C-Bar-4 arrived. Nine of them, headed by the kid, kicked up the dust of the plaza as they tumbled off their jaded, blown horses at a point near the Socorro. Every man carried a rifle or carbine. They wore belts with all the loops stuffed full of cartridges. They were looking for trouble and were very much disappointed at the surprising quietness of the town. Blazes, Browny and Peck Powell met them.

"Whut's the rush?" Blazes inquired, grinning. "And whut's thuh idea uh packin' all them weapons yuh got with yuh?" The grin was disconcerting; they felt foolish.

"Aw, the kid told us that free drinks wuz bein' slid acrost the bar in the Socorro," said one. "Yuh know us, Blazes; we'll go anywheres to git free drinks."

"But why all the weepons?" Blazes persisted, grinning wider than ever.

"Aw, them's jest to make sure that we git the drinks."

"All right. Yuh jest talk to thuh U. S. marshal here. Mebbe he'll let yuh go in tuh git thuh drinks. How about it, Marsh?"

"There's over thirty men in there," said the marshal. "If you can get them to surrender—well, after that, you can go as far as you like."

"Yuh can go farther than that," Blazes added. "We got Hogan locked in his own jail. The town'll belong to us for thuh rest uh thuh night—after we git thuh Socorro cleaned out."

There were a few more questions asked; the boys from the C-Bar-4 wanted to be sure of their ground. Then there were two crashes accompanied by the tinkle of falling glass. Rifle barrels had punched out two of the small frosted panes in the front windows. Two heads cautiously bobbed up to survey the room through these openings. The survey took place over the sights of two large calibered rifles. But no shots were fired by those within; they were willing to surrender.

Cassidy and Rooney came running back across the plaza, just in time to join the tail end of the procession filing in through the front door. The invaders had sidled in and lined up along the front wall. Their guns were cocked and ready. Seven of them had rifles and carbines. Two rifle muzzles, the most intimidating of all because the men behind them could not be seen, were pointed down through the small openings that had been punched in the front windows.

The storekeeper, with his old repeating "Volcanic" Henry rifle, entered through the front door, followed by the marshal, Colt in hand. In the side window appeared two heads, two hands and two Colts. Four men, Standish, the sheriff and two others, had entered through the window of the rear room. And not a word had been spoken.

"Well, hombres," said Cassidy, breaking the silence, as, Colt ready, he walked a few steps toward the men who had instinctively shrunk together in one bunch. They were still shrinking, for those in the front, directly menaced by so many assorted gun muzzles, were trying to worm back behind the others. Half of them had raised their hands. "Well, hombres, hadn't the rest uh yuh better reach for the ceilin'?"

Cassidy hastily sidestepped, to get himself out of line betwen the front wall and the men at the rear. He walked down along the bar toward the rear of the room. He walked slowly, the hair

almost rising at the back of his neck. As he told it afterward, "I sure was scared that some danged fool would shoot off his mouth or his gun. Right then, one wrong word or somebody's nervous trigger finger woulda started a massacree. It ain't no joke, I'll tell yuh! If they'd all grabbed their guns and scattered and started shootin', that room woulda been a slaughterhouse."

But from the rear, the two townsmen started slowly along the bar toward Cassidy. One of them carried a double barreled shotgun, ready to shoot from the hip.

Standish edged away from the door to the rear room. He walked up to the nearest man holding aloft his hands. He pulled this man's gun from the holster.

"Well, Sheriff, don't stay froze," grinned Cassidy. "Nobody's gonna hurt yuh. Give Standish a hand; he's got a lotta work to do."

The sheriff came to life. He hastened over to assist Bill Standish in plucking the revolvers out of holsters. The guns were dropped onto the floor. It was a wholesale job, but an easy one. Gallo's friends and allies were licked, and knew it. In squads of five or six they were marched, one squad at a time, over to the stout barn and locked in. The deputy sheriff was ordered to guard the barn door. The storekeeper volunteered to help him; he was taking no chances. Tres Pecos had been cleaned up and he wanted it to stay that way.

PERHAPS half an hour later there was a conference in the back room of the Socorro. The secretary of the Cattlemen's Association had called it. Those present around the green topped poker table were the secretary, the U. S. marshal, the sheriff, the station agent, Rooney, Standish and Cassidy.

On the other side of the closed door, in the barroom, there were sounds of revelry by night. Blazes had taken charge. "I leave it to you, boys," came his voice; "ain't I thuh best one armed barkeep yuh ever saw? Ain't I?" The vote seemed to be unanimous.

"They're looting the saloon," said the sheriff. "That ain't right. It ought to be stopped."

"Sure, you go ahead and *try* to stop 'em," grinned Cassidy. "I notice, Sheriff, that yuh had your share of the loot," pointing to the two whisky bottles, now far from being full, which stood on the table.

"And I tell yuh what," Cassidy continued, pulling out a large roll of currency and peeling off a few notes which he laid on the table. "There's a hundred dollars. That oughta pay for all the free drinks the boys are havin'." Cassidy continued counting. He placed one thousand dollars in a neat pile and tossed the rest of the money onto the center of the table.

"What's that for?" the sheriff inquired. Cassidy pocketed the thousand.

"That's for you to take charge of," said Cassidy. "I did my part in takin' it away from Gallo. All I wanted was my thousand back."

"Yuh—took—it—away—" the sheriff began. "Did you steal it?"

"Nope! I sure didn't. It was this way—" Cassidy told his side of the transaction. "And there's the rest uh what belongs to Gallo. It don't belong to me."

"Where's that hundred dollars come from?"

"Oh, that?" A grin. "Well, I reckon that was my mistake and Gallo's treat. He owns this saloon, anyway."

The sheriff ponderously cleared his throat. He looked around at the grins. "A-hum! Well, boys, I tell yuh it's tough to grow old. It affects me most in my hearin'. I didn't rightly catch—that I'm sure of—how Gallo *gave* this money to Cassidy to clear himself." The sheriff met the marshal's eyes. The sheriff appeared to be perfectly serious, so much so that the marshal snorted violently, threw his head back as he laughed, and fell backward together with his chair.

"I'll confess," murmured the secretary, "that I was very much surprised to hear that Gallo didn't kick a bit about making a refund. I gather that he didn't have time to count out the change, so he gave up his entire roll and left it to Cassidy to give back the change."

"That's how I understand it," nodded the marshal, pulling his chair back to the table and then reaching for a bottle.

"Somebody may holler that Cassidy went too far in *accepting* all that money," said Rooney. "But I'll state, as Cassidy's attorney, that I'll have no

difficulty at all in clearing him."

"How big a cut of the rewards do yuh expect?" the sheriff inquired, looking at Cassidy.

"Rewards?" Cassidy figuratively pricked up his ears. "What rewards?"

"Dangedest assortment yuh ever heard of," the sheriff answered. "I got a good chance to look them hombres over. I got the pitchers of maybe four-five of them posted in my office. Maybe there's more. I've gotta look that bunch over again."

"There's lots more rewards than them," Standish put in, glancing toward the secretary. "It's your job, Jake, to keep track of the rewards the association offers. My job is to keep track of brands."

They all looked toward the door as it suddenly opened. Blazes stuck his head in.

"Hey," he announced, "I sent thuh kid over again to see how Skinner's gettin' along. Skinner's awake now. He says he wants a drink and a doctor."

"Send him the drink quick," said Cassidy. "Then send somebody to find a doctor."

"They ain't no doctor in Tres Pecos," Blazes answered.

"Then send him *two* drinks," said Cassidy.

"Uh!" Blazes grunted. Then he grinned and closed the door.

"I got a say in this," the sheriff broke in. "But I'm only askin' that yuh let me and Bill Standish interview all them prisoners—one at a time. Bill and me understand how tuh do it. You, Jake, and you, Dan," nodding in turn to the secretary and the marshal, "can listen in. And you, too, Rooney. I take it that you'll be appointed special prosecutor. Uh course, Cassidy, you and the agent can listen in, if you're int'rested. The more witnesses the better, so long as the witnesses are on our side."

"I'd like to, gents, but I'd better go and see if I can discover where the wires were cut. *Adios!*" McNamara departed.

"Yuh can use Apache persuasions on them prisoners for all I care a hoot," said Cassidy. "But I kinda got the idea that yuh already had enough evidence."

"We have," said the secretary. "Plenty to send Gallo and some others up for long terms."

"Every prisoner is due for something," Rooney promised. "Don't let that worry you. Every one is cinched for assault to commit murder, resisting an officer, conspiracy, inciting a riot and a few more things that I'll think up later. The sheriff has the right idea; he wants to sort them out and label them."

"Tha's fine. I'll take your word for it," said Cassidy. "Who was the officer they resisted?"

"Ez Skinner," the marshal answered. "Ez has been a deputy marshal right along, but he never works at it."

"He has? Well, he sure kep' it a secret. But what I wanta know about is them thirty-nine healthy, sound young cows. I come down here to Tres Pecos to buy cows. Yuh say I got a cut uh some rewards comin'. It'd sure suit me fine if yuh could fix it so's I could get them cows as my cut. But mebbe I'm askin' too much."

"Yuh sure are," said the sheriff. "We need them cows as evidence."

"But do we?" Rooney inquired, looking questioningly in turn at the secretary and the brand inspector. "How about it, Bill? Can it be fixed? Cassidy has worked overtime; we'd be getting off cheap if all he wants is that little bunch of stock."

"Them's all I want," said Cassidy. "Yuh got no idea——"

"Yes, I have!" Rooney hastened to interrupt. "I know all about that partner of yours. Don't tell me again." He turned. "How about it, Bill?"

"That's easy," Standish replied. "They was Bar-O-Bar cows—once. Every danged one of them. They're all Herefords. Gallo's men sure run 'em a long way from home. Every brand was blotted into a Scorpion by the same man, one of Gallo's experts, I take it. That's a fine touch for yuh. If two-three hands did the blottin', the Scorpions wouldn't look alike because two or three men would have two or three different ideas on how to do the job. Every man would have a different degree of pressure or touch with a runnin' iron. And to show how smart Gallo is, he picked out nothin' but original Bar-O-Bars to sell to Cassidy. Every Scorpion looked alike."

"I didn't ask for lessons in brand blotting," Rooney snapped out. "Why don't you answer my question?"

"I was," Standish drawled. "I was just explainin' how it would be possible

for yuh to save money. If Cassidy will sign over his cut of all rewards to the association, the association will make a little profit by giving him a bill of sale to the cows. I was explainin' how come I know they're all Bar-O-Bars. Now that outfit is over one hundred miles from here. Buck Bronson—he's the owner of the Bar-O-Bar—musta missed those cows in his last roundup. He'll be glad to get a check from the association for them missin' cows. Cassidy'll be glad to get a bill of sale—a good one, this time—for the same cows. And the association oughta be danged glad to make a li'l profit on the deal. As fur's I can see, everybody'll be happy."

"But how about the evidence?" Rooney inquired.

"You bet! How about that?" the sheriff chimed in.

"That's easy. I told yuh that I had an accident with my gun, and that I skinned the result of the accident, which showed up the Bar-O-Bar. The rest was easy. It still is. When he knows what to look for, anybody with a good eye for brands can tell that every one of those Scorpions used tuh be a Bar-O-Bar. Easy—after yuh know what to look for. We got that hide for evidence. We'll have a few witnesses look at them blotted brands. What more'll yuh need? It's easier all around to let Cassidy have the cows than it'll be to take 'em up to the county seat. We won't need 'em for evidence, I'm tellin' yuh!"

"That's enough for me," said the secretary. "Cassidy can drive those cows away tomorrow, after we've had a look at them."

"Thanks," said Cassidy. "That sure makes me feel good. And right now I only got two worries on my mind."

"What are these two worries?" Rooney inquired.

"One's about Skinner's busted laig. Maybe he's better off where he is till we can get a doctor. But somebody oughta take him another drink and a few blankets and maybe a pillow."

"We'll certainly do all we can to make him comfortable. Don't let that bother you. But what's your other worry?"

"There's six of us here," said Cassidy. "We're sittin' around a nice table. Right over there is some cards and chips. There's no use goin' to bed now. I got a thousand dollars in my pocket. I'm awful worried. I sure am. I'm worried because I'm scared that nobody'll get the idea that we might as well play some poker until daylight!"

THE BITTER CREEK REGION

"WE ENTERED on the Bitter Creek region—horror of overland teamsters—where all possible ills of Western travel united. At daybreak we rose, stiff with cold, to catch the only temperate hour there was for driving. By 9 A. M. the heat was most exhausting. The road was worked up into a bed of blinding white dust . . . and a gray mist of ash and earthy powder hung over the valley, which obscured the sun but did not lessen its heat. At intervals the 'Twenty Mile Desert', the 'Red Sand Desert', and the 'White Desert' crossed our way, presenting beds of sand and soda, through which the half choked men and animals toiled and struggled, in a dry air and under a scorching sky. In vain the yells and curses of the teamsters doubled and redoubled, blasphemies that one might expect to inspire a mule with diabolical strength; in vain the fearful blacksnake curled and popped over the animals' backs, sometimes gashing the skin, and sometimes raising welts the size of one's finger. For a few rods they would struggle on, dragging the heavy load through the clogging banks, and then stop exhausted, sinking to their knees in the hot and ashy heaps. Then two of us would unite our teams and, with the help of all the rest, drag through to the next solid piece of ground, where for a few hundred yards the wind had removed the loose sand and soda, and left bare the flinty and gravelly subsoil. Thus, by most exhausting labor, we accomplished ten or twelve miles a day. Half an hour or more of temperate coolness then gave us respite till soon after sundown, when the cold wind came down, as if in heavy volumes, from the snowy range, and tropic heat was succeeded by arctic cold with amazing suddenness. On the 27th of August one of my mules twice fell exhausted with the heat; that night ice formed in our buckets as thick as a pane of glass." Extract from a teamster's account of a journey in the early '70's.—*C. E. Mulford*

FURS FROM THE FROZEN SEA

By A. de Herries Smith

Author of "Roaring Ice," etc.

A great cleanup of blue fox awaited the fur pirates, Yolder and Wasserman—if only they could postpone the closing of the new government reservation on Wellington Island. But coming overland, bearing the documents, crowding the utmost in speed from his dogs, came Corporal Carney of the Mounted Police. How could he be stopped?

THE BLACK days had come to the Arctic. Four hours of half light from the cold sun's first frosty glint, until it was again swallowed by the ever looming murk.

Short days for the Eskimo "jigging" fish through the ice, for the Liouchiou loping over his trapline, for the fur trader's dogs padding along the bitter coast.

"Fifty below and a wind off the ice!"

The protesting whine came from a parka clad figure standing in the shadows cast by the pointed palisades of the Mission dog corral.

Wasserman shivered, burying his wizened face deeper in the long furred hood. "Goin' to put it over the Mounted Police are you?" he queried scornfully. "No you ain't!" A thin, querulous voice; the tones of a man who had lived too long at the top of the map.

A tree cracked in the frost with a pistol-like report; and at it the two stiffened, eyeing each other. All at once from further along the straggling settlement an Eskimo's husky pup yelped. The men jumped about to see the tawny bundle of fur fly from the shelter of the walls, pursued by its comrade's slashing fangs.

Taut nerves eased. They sighed relief, breath hanging wraithlike on the frosty air.

"Go on, Yolder; let's have it!" Wasserman urged his silent companion, kicking at the powdery snow with nervous mucklucks. "I'm tellin' you I can't stand another winter——"

"Aw, can that tune," the other's thick voice rumbled suddenly. "You'll get outside if you play the game. Lissen. There ain't goin' to be no huntin' reserves on the Arctic islands if I knows it! Coddlin' up these damned blubber chewin' Eskimos is all the Gov'ment can think up. Where do we get off at if they shuts us out of Victoria Land, the best blue fox layout in the North? Bust!"

Yolder glared down at the little man. Then his muffled voice went on again. "The Mounted Police is aimin' to pile onto us guys; that big bonehead Barnes told me so hisself. They's expectin' orders over the wireless any day. Lissen here. I'm stoppin' 'em! Get that?"

"Heh-heh-heh! How you goin' to do it? Been drinkin' canned heat again?" Wasserman's laugh was mocking. His agile, twisted mind leaped to the other's thought; saw that it was futile.

"Ain't figured it out yet, but I'm agoin' to." Yolder boomed, swinging his great arms. "You foller me an' keep your trap shut, Mush."

He stepped out into the moonlight, a huge furry figure of a man. After him Wasserman shambled, still muttering his disgust.

The splendor of the Arctic's full moon shone down on Aklavik's huddle of log buildings; on the squat, snow

mantled shapes of Canada's metropolis beyond the Circle.

The yellow rays glinted on the tall staff beside the trim walls of the Mounted Police detachment and on the towering twin masts of the wireless station; gigantic in that flat desolation of wind twisted spruce and flattened willows.

The blazing disc illuminated the low, snow choked delta channels of the great Mackenzie's mouth, picking out the domelike habitations of the Eskimos. They were only distinguishable from the eye aching whiteness by black chimney pipes, jutting out of the snow blocks at crazy angles.

Yolder headed straight for the wireless station. Dim lights shone out through the heavily frosted panes of the new Mission hospital as he passed, but the trapper did not see them. His ears caught the jangle of a much abused trade gramophone blaring faintly through an igloo's thick walls, but it failed to register on his mind.

The big man even neglected to kick at the huskies snuggled up in the drifts against the log walls, vainly endeavoring to persuade themselves that their gaunt bodies were being warmed by the roaring Quebec heaters within.

Yolder was thinking as rapidly as his slow brain would allow. "Got to stop this reserve stuff till we makes a clean-up. But how? How?"

As was now the nightly custom all the traders would be at the wireless cabin, he knew. It was newly erected, the last of a chain of similar stations connecting the Canadian Arctic with the outside world. The father of a leaping spark that bridged two thousand bitter miles; a winged messenger that broke the awful monotony and kept them sane.

Dapper Dan Bassett, the Corps of Signals Sergeant, would be giving the boys the dope again tonight. At the thought Yolder licked his thick lips. Perhaps some word might come through this time. You could never tell with this wireless stuff. It hit a man suddenlike.

YOLDER thrust the door open, and at once a billow of hot air poured out to hang foglike on the rarified atmosphere.

"Door! *D-o-o-r!* What'cha think this is; Florida? Shut the darn' door, you big ape!" A chorus of unfriendly voices greeted the two as they passed in.

"Cripes, but it's a stinger," the big man muttered, shaking himself, as the heat drove the frost particles through the caribou capote.

"Shut up!" a voice came back promptly. "Dan's getting through. You know the rules."

Yolder glowered at the speaker but made no reply. His eyes went about the group picking out the various men. The traders and trappers lolled on wooden benches, rough shirted and unshaven; startling contrasts to the trimly uniformed signal corps men and the Mounted Police.

No one offered to make room for the newcomers, so they stood in front of the stove watching Sergeant Bassett's sleek black head bent over the desk, finger tapping his instrument, pencil poised in readiness to jot down the incoming messages.

The air was heavy with the reek of a dozen pipes, scarcely strong enough to drown the odor of tanned deerskins, the musty tang of furs, and the all pervading oily smell of fish on which the North must live.

Expectant silence settled again on the wireless cabin. It was broken only by the steady sucking of pipe stems, the clacking of the ticker, and the creak of Yolder's mucklucks, as he swung to and fro before the heater.

Bassett's short laugh made the nervous Wasserman jump. The signal corps man swung about on his stool to grin at the watching group.

"Here's Weaver over at Fort Yukon trying to pull our assembled legs. Listen. Big bunch of Siwashes coming in from the Chandalar. Putting on a *moochigan.* United States Signal Corps extends a warm invitation—— Darn! Lost it! Say, you guys'll have to keep quiet."

The wire was humming now; filled with messages picked up from all over the continent; an Alaskan cannery sending a code message to the head office in Bellingham; ships off the Californian coast talking to each other.

All at once the signal sergeant thrust out an authoritative hand, and even the sucking noises of the pipes ceased.

Yolder's elbow drove sharply into Wasserman's ribs. There was something big coming; might be dope on the reserve.

Bassett jerked his pad toward him, scribbling rapidly in time to his crisp voice:

Mounted Police headquarters, Edmonton, calling Aklavik—Aklavik—Aklavik. Important. Order in council confirms creation of Arctic islands fur reserve for Eskimos and native halfbreeds. Reserve is closed to white trappers dating as from December 16, 1926. Cancel all trappers' licenses immediately signed confirmation by Minister of Interior is received.

Corporal Carney leaving Edmonton for Aklavik via Vancouver and Alaska overland route with necessary documents. Operator notify officer commanding Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Calling Aklavik—Aklavik—Aklavik. Repeat message, Aklavik.

The scratching of the sergeant's pencil on the paper sounded loud as the rasp of a file. The men in the hut stared at each other, open mouthed. The *moonias-ses* at Ottawa had done it at last! Now there would be something happening!

Bassett's low voice cut through the pall of silence. "Burke, I wish you'd take this over to the O. C. right away, will you?"

"Sure." The Mounted Police constable jumped to his feet and at once the wireless hut broke out into feverish conjecture and condemnation.

Burke jerked a parka off the floor; but before he reached the door Yolder and Wasserman had crowded out ahead of him.

Venting little squeals of delight, Wasserman clutched the big man's arm. "Got it, Otto; got it!" he piped.

"Got what? *Ssh!*"

The Mountie plunged out through the door. Before he had turned the corner of the wireless hut Wasserman tugged Yolder's head down level with his own, whispering excitedly. "It come to me in a flash! Just like that. Listen here, old-timer. We can't stop the blasted gove'-ment starting the reserve, can we? They'll do it 'spite of hell, sooner or later."

"Well?" An impatient grunt from the big man.

"No, we can't," Wasserman insisted. "But here's what we will do. *We'll go over the divide an' stop this guy Carney from gettin' in with the papers!* They can't start no reserves without the minister's name on it, can they? We'll put this bozo outa the way, poison a bunch of fox, an' make a getaway to the Alaska side. Then they can keep their danged reserve for all we care. How's that?"

Yolder's thick lips remained open. All at once he threw a great arm about his partner's narrow shoulders, enfolding him in a bearish hug.

"OAH!"

The musher's voice floated down the river's frosted reaches, echoing back from the gravelly cliffs. At once the tired dogs threw themselves down in the snow and hardly before the echoes ceased ringing they were five circular furry balls, cold noses snug under the bushy tails.

Wasserman, who was breaking trail ahead of the team, turned and padded back to the sled. "About time you took a whack at it too," the little man grumbled. "Think I don't keep track, eh? I been bustin' snow now for a good three——"

"Aw, can it!" Yolder broke in, slamming his great hands together with resounding thuds. "You're tough in spite of all your bawlin'. It ain't that though. See there!" He was pointing to a snow wreathed mountain, its peak lost in the low hanging clouds.

"That's Old Crow away up there to the northeast," he told the other. "We'll be in American territory in a couple of days. Going to pull off the river an' take to the hills. Don't aim to meet Carney on the ice, do you? Fort Yukon wirelessed that the big ditch was froze over three days ago, an' we should be meetin' him any day now. Here, gimme them webs an' I'll break trail. It'll be heavy goin' on the bank, but we can't take no chances."

Wasserman thankfully surrendered the long snowshoes and gripped the sled handles, as Yolder's great bulk thrust its way through the willows fringing the river bank.

The men mounted painfully to the high bench above the river, floundering in the drifts, pushing on the sled, and flogging the dogs.

Keeping parallel with the river below Yolder plodded forward steadily, zigzagging through the stunted spruce and

poplars that clung to the gravelly slopes. They traveled thus, mutely profane, for several hours.

All at once Wasserman saw the trail breaker halt and flounder sideways, hiding himself behind the black bole of a spruce tree. Yolder cautiously beckoned the other man forward, and in a few moments he was looking down a long white reach to where a dog team toiled slowly forward. Ahead of the huskies a tall figure was throwing up great powdery puffs of snow with the long racquettes. The two looked at each other, nodding silently. Even Wasserman's features displayed a thin smile at this good luck.

"Cripes! What's comin' off now?" Yolder queried, half to himself, a moment later.

He saw that the trail breaker was clad in the short Mounted Police bearskin coat; could even make out the riding breeches and long blue stockings of the winter uniform.

But his puzzled eyes had leaped to another black blotch on the river's white ribbon. From a creek mouth, mantled by a jungle of willow scrub and almost under their feet, a man was loping out onto the unbroken surface of the Porcupine.

The newcomer paused for a moment, then sped across the stream toward the Mounted Police sled, waving his arms.

"Indian," Wasserman mumbled. His quick eyes had noted the gay beading on the caribou capote, the flashing of the porcupine quills on the man's moccasins.

The police team stopped. Now the three men were in earnest conversation, the Indian pointing to the creek he had just left. Finally the dogs were started again, disappearing into the tunnel-like entrance of the little river.

"Indian camp up the creek, an' somethin' goin' on that we've got to find out. You start the dogs, Pete, an' come on slow behind me," Yolder ordered. "Keep back far enough so's they won't give us away by yowlin' when they smells the camp. Easy does it, mind. We're goin' to get this guy Carney right now!"

He caught Wasserman's grunt, and without looking back commenced shoving his way down toward where he sensed the encampment lay.

"WELL, this is the devil and all, K'nai, eh?" the Mountie grumbled at his silent guide as the two trotted behind the sled. "Held up for three weeks at Circle. Latest freeze-up on the Yukon for twenty three years. Then this! We've made about a day, by night hiking, and now it looks as though we were going to lose it again. Still I wouldn't be human if I didn't have a look at this sick kid. Oh, damn such luck!"

The Siwash made no comment other than to voice one of his usual grunts. The Mountie lapsed into silence again, dimly conscious of the trotting dogs, his mind filled with a single thought; "Two days left! Two days left!" It rang through his brain over and over; a monotonous dirge.

Carney well knew that Ottawa headquarters would tolerate no excuses if the papers were not delivered in time. To men seated in comfortable steam heated offices, broken river ice, blizzards and stabbing frost meant nothing. That promised officer's commission was fading with every slow mile.

The wild baying of camp dogs, and a fluttering of long black skirts disappearing into the teepees heralded their arrival at the Liouchiou camp.

The skin lodges were set snugly in a clump of thick spruce on the low bank above the stream, lazy smoke from the cooking fires drifting through the snow laden branches above.

Carney's nostrils were suddenly smitten by the combined smells of dog fish, and deerskins being tanned over the smoke. He had little time for observation however, being too busily engaged in flogging back the Liouchiou's dogs, which threw themselves in a howling mob on the tired police huskies.

The frenzied yelping brought half a dozen men running out.

"Awas! Awas! Awas!"

High noted calls rang out through the woods. Sticks pounded on the flat, darting heads and in another minute the huskies were calmly curled up in the harness, sensing that they were free from further attacks.

"You stay here and watch the dogs," Carney ordered the Indian guide as he fumbled in his packs for the emergency medicine kit. "I'll only be gone a few minutes, and then we'll hit out again. Better give the dogs a feed of cornmeal

and tallow now, so's to save time."

"Where's the boy?" he queried in Liouchiou, wheeling on the silent, staring men.

One of them plucked the Mountie's sleeve, pointing to the nearest teepee. Carney followed the man and ducked through the lodge flap, nostrils curling in disgust at the odors assailing them.

A wrinkled and filthy old squaw was sitting in one corner, swaying back and forth, a ragged bundle in her arms.

"Behold, it is Aruk," the man mumbled pointing to the bundle. His brown eyes under the straight black hair were wide with fear.

"All right. Bring him out here to the light near the doorway," the Mountie ordered crisply. The rags were stripped back, disclosing the thin frame of a five-year-old boy, three frostbitten toes purple with gangrene.

Carney shuddered at the sight, knowing what it meant. "Get two men to hold the boy and send the woman out," he ordered the Indian. The Mountie lighted a cigarette, inhaling the smoke vigorously to shut out the mounting odors as he rummaged in the medicine kit for his surgical knife.

With the three Indians holding the screaming patient, Carney forced the boy's lips open, pouring whisky down his throat until the fiery liquid took effect and the child lay back senseless.

The Mountie went on steadily with his gruesome task, ears vaguely catching the whispers of the women in the next teepee and the harsh breathing of the frightened Indians. But his mind was across the divide at Aklavik. A warning blazed across his brain in letters of fire; "Two days left! Two days left!"

"There," Carney coughed, deluging the wounds with iodine and wrapping the little Indian's foot in a piece of clean flour sacking.

"Clean, mind!" he added in Liouchiou. "You understand. Plenty of water all the——"

The words were cut off by a sudden baying from the camp dogs. A maniacal chorus of yelps filled the little frosted valley under the cliffs. Three astonished gasps from the Indians.

For a split second the open lodge flap was darkened by a flying shape!

Carney was dimly conscious of the wounded boy's moan. A pair of iron arms gripped him as he fell; a hard knee pressed into the small of his back.

"Belt them *nitchies* outa here. Go on; use the whip!" Yolder's panting voice.

Thug! Thug! In prompt reply the whip butt came down on the tousled heads. Frightened yells and the sound of bodies catapulting through the stiff deerskins forming the teepee wall.

Carney twisted and kicked, but to no avail. His arms were jerked behind him. The iron knee was relentless. The corporal dimly recognized the gruff voice above him; but his dazed brain failed to respond to the questions flooding it.

"That rawhide now! Come on; show some speed." Yolder's voice again. Babiche thongs bit into Carney's straining wrists and ankles.

"He's fixed. Pitch him over an' go out an' tie up that trail breaker before he comes to. Watch them other Indians."

The Mountie was rolled over on his back to find himself staring up into Yolder's heavy face. The black stubble was split with a wide grin.

"Well, Dickie me little lad, we got you, eh?" the big man rumbled. "Ain't goin' to hold out no helpin' hand to no poor little Eskimos this trip, eh?"

Carney's mind groped for a solution to this riddle. It came suddenly and his face went white under its coating of tan. "Yolder, I'll get you ten years for this!" the Mountie threatened, still struggling vainly against the thongs.

"Save your wind," the other informed him. "Out here on the divide you guys with the yaller stripe don't amount to a hill of beans. Ain't goin' to hurt you none, Carney, but you's goin' to stay here until after the sixteenth. Savvy what that means? Little vacation, see? Goin' to shoot your dogs now Don't aim to have you follerin' me."

Hot words bubbled to the Mountie's lips; but he forced them back, knowing it was useless to voice empty threats. He saw Yolder shift the groaning boy further back. Then Carney was rolled over, the rawhides inspected, following which he heard the man pad out of the lodge.

A sudden fusillade of shots sounded, howls from the dogs, yelps from some of the wounded animals rushing for the shelter of the woods. Above the horrid pandemonium the shrieks of the women and children. Then all at once an over-

powering silence fell on the little camp under the sweeping spruce.

Yolder lowered the smoking Winchester to grin at Wasserman. "Brains, eh?" he chuckled, pointing to the bloody huddles in the Mounted Police-traces. "He's here for a few weeks anyhow—long enough for us to clean up on the Esks' fur an' make a getaway. You're not such a bum shot after all. Guess you got most of the Indian huskies from the look of it."

"Two or three vamosed. They're hit anyhow, an' not enough to make up a team," the little man agreed, rubbing his shoulder. "How about takin' these Liouchious' furs while we're at it?" he added as an afterthought, waving to the empty teepees.

"You're the bird with the gray matter, Pete," Yolder chuckled. "Bring up our team an' we'll load 'em. There's a hind quarter of caribou up there on that pole cache. Might as well throw that in too."

"Sure," Wasserman said, following the other's pointing finger to the little platform tied between four spruce trees and beyond the reach of marauding dogs. "That'll go good. Fed up on bacon an' beans."

The swift coming northern night was falling by the time the two had ransacked the teepees, thrown the fur into the sleigh, and robbed the cache of its meat.

They sat hunched over a little fire that crackled and sputtered, sending up showers of sparks against the night's black curtain. The tobacco Carney had brought from the outside was used freely, its fragrance mingling with the rich odor of the frying caribou steaks.

Under these influences even Wasserman forgot his customary plaints. He commenced humming a song, only to stop abruptly at Yolder's roar of laughter.

CARNEY'S wrists and ankles throbbed maddeningly. The thin babiche cords restricted the circulation and his swelling limbs added to the agony. The Mountie had given up striving, sensing its uselessness.

He lay motionless, listening to the night noises. Now and then one of the wounded dogs in the timber whimpered as the cold stung its hurts. A squirrel in a spruce overhead commenced chattering when the mounting column of smoke from the campfire roused the little animal out of its nest.

"You all right, Carney?" Yolder's voice split the pall of silence like a fire alarm sounding in a sleeping city street.

The Mountie made no reply as thick hands groped along his wrists and ankles, sending an excruciating wave of agony over the bound man's body.

Then a couple of deerskin robes were tossed over him, and the corporal was dimly conscious of Yolder's retreating moccasins.

The long night ticked off in age long, agonizing minutes. The leaping light from the fire revealed the two trappers carrying spruce branches for bedding. They talked together, low toned, for a time, then rolled up in their blankets on the scented fronds, back to back.

Cold dawn was breaking as Yolder lumbered into the teepee for the last time. The big man carefully felt the prisoner's rawhide bonds to return to the sled, humming to himself.

Carney caught the whine of the dogs, and Wasserman's thin cursing as he kicked the huskies into place and hitched them.

THE team was halted on the crest of the Arctic divide. To the east a gentle slope stretched down to where the rounded domes of the Wolftooth Hills marked the Mackenzie's banks.

Here and there a dwarf, wind twisted spruce sheltered in the shallow gullies. Otherwise the watershed was bare but for willow clumps bent almost double under their loads of snow.

Beyond the distant hills a faint smudge hung in the clear air, where the fires of Aklavik sent their two score columns upward to merge in a drifting smoky haze.

Ahead of the team Yolder's figure bulked hugely against the clear sky. One great hand was on the little man's shoulder, the other pointed toward the smoke cloud.

"I see it all right," came Wasserman's thin, irritable voice. "We're ten miles beyond Lapierre's old fort now too. There's no sense bustin' ourselves gettin' into Aklavik tonight. We got plenty of time, an' I tell you, Otto, I'm a-goin' to ride in the sled for the rest of the trip so you can——"

Click!

A hard, metallic sound brought the two men spinning about on their heels.

Yolder's thick lips opened. His jaws dropped but no word came. A bleating wail burst from Wasserman.

They stared back at the sleigh, eyes wide. On the sled Corporal Carney sat, face wreathed in a cold smile, fingers on the lever of the Winchester that lay against his hip.

The lead dog sat up, wrinkled his snout, caught the Mountie's scent, and promptly curled down in the snow again. To the two men the little wind sighing through the willow clumps sounded like a gale roaring through the rigging of a fullrigged ship; seemed to fill the whole world with its throbbing.

"Better not, Yolder!" the Mountie's even voice sounded a warning. The big man had noted the corporal's stagger as he put both feet to the ground. The renegade promptly halted his advance. Wasserman was running backward and forward like a terrified snowshoe rabbit.

"Better not," Carney said again. "I'm pretty stiff with lying under the furs in your sled so long, but I'm not so damned useless but what I can fill your big carcass with lead at ten yards range."

"Lyin' under the furs?" Yolder repeated the words mechanically, his torpid mind still unable to penetrate the maze of conflicting thoughts racing across it.

"Exactly. You should be long enough in the North to know that a Liouchiou never forgets a kindly action or a bad one. The Mounted Police don't anyhow, Yolder. Just as soon as I have you two behind the bars I'm going back. Dogs and grub for the outfit, and a purple and green dress all mottled with pink spots for the old woman that allowed herself to be tied up in my place. Say, she'll be the talk of the Yukon country when I'm done rigging her out."

"How the hell did ya get in the sleigh?" The big man's curiosity overcame his fear. He stepped forward unthinkingly as he put the question, only to halt when the black muzzle of the rifle swung round to him in a steady circle.

"Carried in by the Indians while you two overfed birds were taking your beauty sleep," Carney laughed. "Didn't notice that the caribou quarter was gone, eh? Switched the freight, and believe me but I've had a nice time getting limbered up under those stinking pelts. But I feel fine now thanks, Yolder. Ouch! Just stand where you are for a moment please. I want to rub my ankles again."

"What you goin' to do, Carney?" Wasserman appealed. In his agitation the little man was gnawing at his bearskin mittens.

"Do?" Long suppressed fury boiled up in the Mountie. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. That's Aklavik's smoke over there and this is the 16th of December, 1926. We've got until midnight to get in; but we'll be there by five o'clock or I'll know the reason why!"

Carney glanced over his shoulder at the high red sun, wheeled back again. "Listen!" he shot out. "You two are going to break trail and I'm going to use the whip. Know what that means? A record trip from the divide to the hills, and the first time the lead dog steps on a snowshoe, the owner of it goes west! Understand that? I'll shoot and I won't miss! The first time, Yolder!"

Wasserman had not waited for the final words. He read the message in Carney's narrowed eyes. The little man threw himself down the slope, bent forward, arms swinging, half hidden in a cloud of powdery snow.

After him Yolder lumbered, great bowlegs jerking him forward at an astonishing gait.

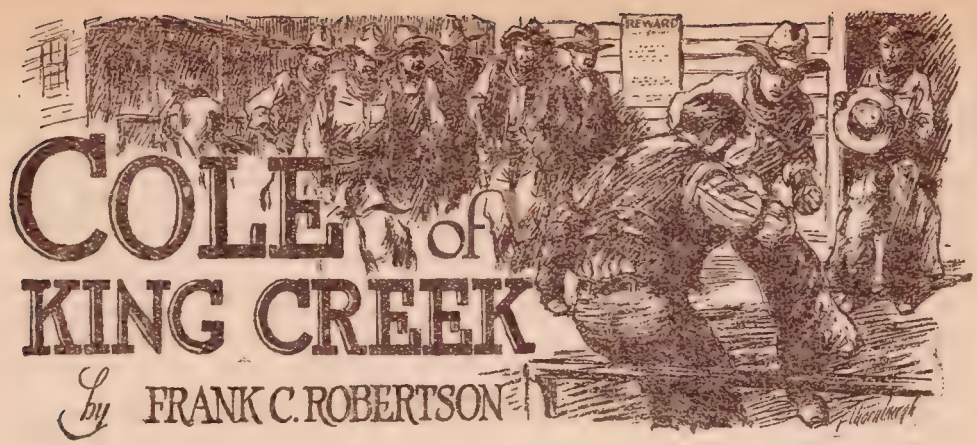
Corporal Carney settled the Winchester in the back of the sled, picked up the whip, grasped the steering handles, and balanced himself stiffly on the runners.

"Mush! Mush!"

A tinkle of bells as the huskies threw themselves into the collars and raced down the long rolling slope toward Aklavik.

BLANKET TALK

BY SIGNALING with their blankets the Plains Indians gave information and asked and answered questions over long distances. Having no alphabet, their codes necessarily were restricted, but they answered the more pressing needs.—*C. E. Mulford*



COLE of KING CREEK

by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Author of "An Unwilling Meddler," "The Man Branders," etc.

Part I

Young Bert Cole was ambitious, but the ill repute of the shiftless Coles of King Creek followed him all over the range. It got him into trouble with the law; it won him the enmity of the most powerful man in the county; and finally it embroiled him in a conspiracy which dealt in wholesale theft—and, on occasion, in ruthless murder.

Chapter I

ACCUSED

BERT COLE was pleasantly conscious of the good appearance he made as he rode over the railroad crossing and looked down upon the one important street of Snowville. Chief, his fat little sorrel saddle horse, knew how to bow his neck and show off when in town, and Bert was the proud possessor of a brand new saddle and a gorgeous green shirt. The ensemble was designed to attract public notice.

Bert himself was not vain of his personal appearance. No one had ever told him he was good looking, and he only knew that as far as appearances went he did not need to fear comparison with other men. But he rather hoped his progress down Main Street to the livery stable would gain the attention it deserved. He was aware that no Cole from King Creek had ever ridden such a good outfit into town. In Bert's estimation the people of Snowville represented the most critical public opinion, and he saw nothing mediocre or shabby about the drab, squatty buildings with their flaked off paint and wind ruffled shingles. It did not occur to him that the unpaved, dirty streets, flanked by uneven board sidewalks reflected a lack of enterprise upon the part of the town's inhabitants.

"Looks like there was some excitement down there by the Mint," he murmured aloud, as he saw a crowd of perhaps fifty people milling about in the street in front of Ike Blunt's Mint Saloon.

He touched Chief lightly with the spurs, and the little sorrel broke into an easy lope down the street, but there was no one to take notice of the pretty little horse, the new saddle, or the green shirt.

Bert rode up to the edge of the crowd, and presently he got a man's attention. "What's it all about?" he demanded.

"Somebody's broke into Ike Blunt's store last Wednesday, an' stole some things. They've jest ketched the Finney kid with some o' the goods, an' Ike's goin' to punish him."

"What d'ye mean—send him to jail?"

"Naw. That don't do a skunk like that any good. Ike's goin' to give him a public horse whippin'," said the man.

"Why, he can't do that," Bert protested. "He can arrest him, but he'd have to be tried an' found guilty."

"He don't have to be," the man sneered. "I reckon Ike can do as he pleases with him, an' I don't figger this

thief will wanta make any complaints after Ike gits through with him."

"Say, was the store robbed Wednesday night?"

"That's what I said."

"Well, they don't claim Pat Finney done that, do they?" Bert demanded.

"Why, sure they do. Ike had just bought a dozen pair o' buckskin gloves from a squaw, an' they was all stole. Then a while ago this Finney kid showed up here wearin' a pair o' the gloves," the man informed.

"Why—why—I can explain that," Bert declared. He flung himself from his horse, and shouldered his way into the crowd.

In the center of the crowd was the hitch rack in front of the Mint Saloon. In a little cleared space stood a burly giant of a man with a long, pliable buggy whip in his hand. In front of him, backed against the hitch rack, cowered a slim, yellow haired young fellow of nineteen. Young Finney's lips were drawn back from his teeth in a snarl, and his eyes glittered with a poisonous hate for the man with the whip.

"Git that undershirt off, an' drape yoreself across that pole there," Ike Blunt ordered, with a vicious swish of the whip through the air. The man was pretending to mete out justice, but the look on his brutal face showed that he was delighted to have an opportunity to exercise his innate cruelty.

"I never robbed yore damn' store, I tell yuh!" the boy fairly shrieked.

"Strip that undershirt off him," Blunt ordered, and two of his saloon employees stepped eagerly forward to obey.

"Just a minute, Mr. Blunt," Bert Cole cried eagerly. "You're makin' a mistake, an' I can explain that yuh've got the wrong man."

"Yuh can?" Blunt's cruel grin faded, and was replaced by a menacing scowl. The man was in no mood to be robbed of his pleasure.

"Yuh say yore store was robbed last Wednesday night?" Bert asked.

"Yes. What about it?"

"Keep yore mouth shut, Bert. They'll be draggin' you into this damn' frame-up, too," young Pat Finney said.

Bert turned a surprised gaze upon the speaker. He had never thought young Finney had the stuff in him to take a licking when there was a possible way out. Nor could Bert see why Pat should fear to speak the truth.

"Draggin' me? I should say not," Bert protested. "Now look here, Mr. Blunt—last Wednesday Pat was with me all day. He stayed at our place the night before, an' Wednesday I went up to the head o' Cottonwood Creek with him to git his traps. It was late when we got 'em gathered up, so we stayed all night at his cabin up there, an' come home the next day."

"Le's see them gloves you got on," Blunt snapped.

Bert glanced quickly at the buckskin "squaw" gloves he had on his hands. His face crimsoned with anger as he realized that he, too, was being practically accused of being a thief.

"All right," he said, drawing off the gloves, "there they are, an' they're just like Pat's. We bought both pair last Wednesday from Widowboga's squaw."

"You did like hell!" the merchant retorted. "The linin' in them gloves is exactly the same as the linin' in the ones I had. All the difference yore talk has made is that I wear out two buggy whips instead o' one."

THE appalling possibility that he might be publicly whipped as Pat Finney was on the verge of being whipped threw Bert into momentary confusion. He looked helplessly around the circle of faces and found no sympathy in any of them. With one exception they were grinning expectantly. The exception was Linn Marshall, the owner of the Flying M, the largest cattle outfit in the country. Marshall's dark face was merely impassive, perhaps amused at this revelation of the frailties of his fellowmen.

"Look here," Bert exclaimed violently. "I'm tellin' the truth about this thing, an' anybody that says me or Pat Finney robbed this store is a liar. Hunt up Widowboga's squaw if you want the truth. Or ask my folks. They know where we was."

A roar of laughter greeted this defense. "Think anybody would take the word of a King Creek Cole?" Ike Blunt said loudly. "Why, the whole shif'less outfit is thieves an' liars."

Splat! Bert Cole's punch was so swift and unexpected that it found Ike Blunt's unprotected jaw before anyone saw it start.

The huge merchant and saloon keeper crashed headlong into the muck caused by his customers' horses. Immediately afterward Blunt's two employees, Bummer Kelly and Slant Wickison, made a concerted dive toward Bert.

Bert was jarred by a blow to the head from Wickison, but he beat Bummer Kelly to the punch, and the saloon bouncer measured his length on the ground. Whirling, Bert mixed it with Slant Wickison, the only one of the three smaller than himself. In an instant Slant was on the defensive, giving ground until the crowd stopped his retreat. He tried to clinch, but a short jab that traveled no more than a foot snapped his head back and he sank to the ground just as Ike Blunt rushed Bert with a bellow of fury.

Ike Blunt had long been considered the champion of Snowville. While he had been fighting regularly the reputation was perhaps deserved, but of recent years his reputation had been enough to make most men let him alone; and becoming lazy he had let his saloon bouncers handle the obstreperous characters whom formerly he had attended to himself. Yet he was a formidable opponent even yet with his more than two hundred pounds of bone and brawn. Against him Bert Cole seemed a stripling, though Bert stood five feet ten in his socks, and weighed a hundred and seventy pounds.

But Bert was far from being a novice in a fight. Shiftless the majority of King Creek Coles undoubtedly were, but they were given to athletic pursuits. There were no better horsemen anywhere than the five Cole brothers, and old Alf Cole himself had been a fighting man in his youth. He had imparted much of his skill to his boys. Many and many an hour had Bert spent in sparring and wrestling with his brothers, until he was the master of any two of them. And he had developed a punch that any heavyweight boxer might have envied.

As Blunt bore down with arms extended in fighting pose Bert laughed. He stepped in toe to toe with the saloonkeeper, caused Blunt to lead and miss. Then he was under the man's guard with a sickening punch to the stomach, and whipped over a right to the head when Blunt involuntarily doubled over.

He had Blunt going. The saloonkeeper had already lost his wind, and was giving ground, while Bert's flying fists appeared to be landing everywhere. But Bummer Kelly was not yet through. The bouncer rushed in and landed a blow that sent Bert sprawling.

He was on his feet in an instant, but both adversaries were upon him. Into his mind came a savage determination to win, no matter what the odds. His brain seemed strangely clear. He took many a blow, but he contrived to make his opponents miss more than they landed, and occasionally he contrived to get one over himself; and when he landed the victim knew that he had been hit. Very cunningly he contrived to make them get in each other's way, and while they were untangling themselves he did his most damage.

SNOWVILLE had never seen such a fight. Another one was going on at the same time, but it attracted little attention. Pat Finney had suddenly decided to rush to the defense of Bert, but Slant Wickison had got up in time to engage him, and they were fighting furiously, with the older man gradually wearing young Finney down.

Around and around milled the three main contestants, the crowd giving them room whenever it was needed, yet crowding in over the blood stained ground in order to see.

Twice Bert was knocked down when Ike Blunt's wild blows happened to land in the right place, but each time he was up before Bummer Kelly could jump on him. Game as was the battle he was waging, defeat would have been inevitable had not Ike Blunt completely lost his wind.

"Stay with him, Kelly," he grunted, and stepped aside for a moment to pump the air back into his abused lungs. On the instant Bummer Kelly launched himself at Bert's back to bring him down.

Strategically it was a poor move. Instead of young Cole coming over backward Bummer Kelly's heels flashed through the air as he was thrown over Bert's head, and he came down with such force on the hard ground that he had no more fight in him.

Instantly Bert was upon Ike Blunt again. The saloonkeeper gulped for air and raised his hands to meet the

assault; but there was no more steam behind his blows, and his young antagonist had not slowed up in the least. Bert could afford to take chances. Purposely leaving an opening he waited for Blunt to start a ponderous swing, sidestepped, and then came in with a punch just under the breastbone that left Blunt writhing in agony upon the ground.

An instant later Bert seized Slant Wickison by the collar and jerked him from the prostrate form of Pat Finney. He shook the man, jerked him around, slapped him twice, and then released him with a kick that sent the fellow plunging into the midst of the spectators. Then he faced the crowd belligerently, but no one wanted to accept his unspoken challenge. His gorgeous green shirt was in rags, and his entire front stained from a bloody nose. Both eyes were black, and his lips puffed out, but he was a dominant figure. He had at least won physical respect.

A few minutes before he had been just one of the disreputable King Creek Coles, whom no one ever took the trouble to treat with other than contempt. But now, no matter what their secret thoughts were, men would give him outward consideration.

"My Gawd, who'd ever thunk it?" one man marveled aloud. "Think of Ike Blunt comin' a cropper like that at the hands of a Cole—an' not much more'n a kid at that."

"Ike'll make him pay fer that," his neighbor commented. "Watch him send Cole an' the Finney kid over the road for robbery."

The words carried to Bert and punctured the momentary elation he was feeling. He knew Blunt's power, reputed to be greater than that of any other man in Summit County. And for the first time he realized how much he would be handicapped by being a King Creek Cole. He could not help having been born a Cole, but he suddenly resolved that they should not make him a jailbird for a crime he never had committed.

"Come on, Pat," he said, "let's git out o' this."

Before the fight the crowd would have blocked any move of his to escape, but now it parted to let him move through, with young Finney at his heels. He reached Chief and threw the bridle reins over the horse's head.

"Where's yore pony, Pat?" he asked his friend.

"Over yonder," the boy pointed.

"Git him," Bert said curtly. "I'll 'tend to anybody that tries to stop yuh." He was now in the saddle, and his hand rested on the handle of his gun. The crowd had surged back toward the saloon. It was uncertain as to what young Cole might do next, and no one was anxious to challenge him. Only one man stood his ground, and he now came forward with the same half satirical smile on his dark face. Bert watched him questioningly.

But Marshall did not take his hands from his pockets. "Don't be a fool, Cole," he said evenly. "Come out to my ranch. I'm here in a car an' I'll be there before you arrive." It was a command, and the cattleman turned away as though with full assurance that it would be obeyed.

Bert looked at the retreating back of the cattleman in astonishment, and then rode over to where young Finney had mounted his little bay pony. It had been in Bert's mind to flee the county to avoid arrest and if anyone attempted to stop him to fight. Now he hesitated.

He really knew little about Linn Marshall, but he was no worse off in that respect than other people. Marshall had come to the country five years before, purchased the largest ranch in the country, and attended to his own business ever since. He did not obey the orders of the local bosses, nor did he try to dominate others. But Bert knew that Marshall had never been on good terms with Ike Blunt.

"Which way do we go?" Pat Finney asked.

"To the Flying M," Bert announced with sudden determination. He had a feeling that he was putting himself in Marshall's power by taking that course, but against that he felt that he was on the verge of some stirring adventure, and in his reckless mood he was ready for anything.

Chapter II

DARK STRATEGY

YOUNG Pat Finney was voluble in his indignation against Ike Blunt as they rode along, but Bert Cole was strangely silent. For some

time Bert had been aware in a vague way that his people were held in low esteem, but this was the first time it had been brought home to him that it was a handicap personally.

"Just what was yore idee in not tellin' 'em where we was?" Bert asked suddenly.

"Why, I figgered it'd turn out just like it did. They'd accuse you, too," was the reply.

"On account o' the gloves?"

"No; I didn't think o' the gloves, but —but——"

"On account of the reputation of the Coles," Bert grimly finished for him.

"I guess so," young Finney admitted. "It's hell, Bert, for you to be blamed for what yore brothers do. I know yo're square. Maybe yuh didn't know it, but I seen yuh make Clyde an' Floyd turn loose a coupla Injun cayuses they'd swiped. But yuh couldn't make nobody believe you was any better than the rest of 'em."

"I suppose not," Bert said bitterly. He recalled the incident, but not with any great degree of resentment against his brothers. For years he had known that they were petty thieves. Some finer fiber of his nature had kept him straight, even though they had argued that theft was necessary for them to live.

The life led by the King Creek Coles had filled Bert with dissatisfaction for years, but he had not realized until recently just what was wrong with it. Years before, Alfred Cole had located in King Creek Canyon, filing a homestead that included all the available farming land there, which covered about sixty acres of wild hay meadow, and perhaps forty more which it was possible to farm had there been water for it. But already the waters of King Creek had been appropriated by ranchers out in the valley.

Cole had never taken steps to acquire a water right, nor had he ever broken up the small amount of farmable land where he could at least have raised grain. He managed to steal enough water to irrigate his hay meadow. By gifts and thefts he managed to get a few cows and horses, but the income was decidedly meager, and would have been still worse had it not been that his wife, a spare, silent woman, raised a garden, and thus kept the table partially supplied.

As soon as the boys were old enough to work, Alf Cole retired. When he was not in Snowville playing endless games of "sluff," he was in the cabin smoking countless pipes of tobacco. But the oldest boys, Dave, Clyde and Floyd, had little more enterprise than their father. They were born horsemen. When unbroken colts or outlaw horses were not available for them to ride they went out and caught their neighbors' steers and calves to practice on; but despite their facility in this direction none of them were ever able to hold a job. They managed to get the hay crop put up each summer, but this was about the full extent of their earnings—except for such stealing as they managed to do, which was mostly of Indian ponies, animals of little or no value, yet extremely hard to obtain.

Old Alf chuckled at his boys' misdeeds, and his wife merely looked grim disapproval. Then, when Bert came along and refused to join the older boys, old Alf merely grinned with amusement, and his wife maintained her silence. Only by the marked respect she showed him at all times did Bert know that his mother approved of his actions. He suspected a latent strength of character under her grim exterior, but her time was taken up with her garden and the youngest son, Ashton, now a hulking young giant of eighteen. A horse once had kicked the young brother in the head; and that sad accident had left him with but half a mind.

For a long time Bert had been anxious to work, but no one would give him steady employment. There were times when the big cow outfits had to have extra hands, and then the Coles were in demand; but they were always discharged as quickly as possible. It was one of these jobs which had enabled Bert to buy his new saddle.

His honesty had been consistently overlooked. It was known that nothing was safe lying around loose where the Coles were, and he was watched just as suspiciously as his brothers. No distinctions were made. As yet nothing serious had been proved on the Cole boys—Dave had paid a couple of fines, and Floyd and Clyde had served two short jail sentences each, all of which amused them—but every rancher was

looking for a chance to send them over the road for keeps.

These things Bert had dimly understood, but it had taken the affair in Snowville to make him realize that his name placed him outside the pale of respectable people. Now he stood accused of a theft of which he had no knowledge, but no one would believe him. For the first time, however, he felt bitterness toward society. He rejoiced that he had been able to inflict physical injury upon Ike Blunt, who in some way seemed to stand for that society which would not give him a chance. A first class criminal was in the making, unless something intervened.

AN AUTOMOBILE came up with a rush from behind them. As it stopped they recognized Linn Marshall. With him was a girl. She wore no hat, having just obtained a marcel in Snowville's one beauty shop. Bert thought he had never seen anything as beautiful as this girl. A sport sweater with a smart red tie gave her a decidedly jaunty appearance. Her lips were parted in a smile, showing white, even teeth, but at sight of Bert's face they closed with a hint of repulsion.

"Whip up to that lava bowl just ahead there, and we'll wait for you," Marshall said. "There's an officer after you with a car."

The car rolled on, and the two boys spurred up to the best speed Pat's pony could make.

"Who is she?" Bert asked. The young hobo trapper, though having been in the country only a couple of years, was in many respects better acquainted than was Bert.

"The flapper with Marshall?" Pat grinned. "She's his sister. Been here nearly a year. Ain't you ever seen her at dances?"

"I don't go to many dances," Bert muttered. He had liked to dance, but being refused by two girls out of every three he asked to dance had chilled his ardor.

"I been around a little, an' I know this dame sure does outclass the rest of the local talent," Pat said.

Glancing back Bert saw a streak of dust coming along the road behind them, undoubtedly the officers. But a moment later they had entered the great lava bowl through which the wagon road twisted. In the bottom, on a fill that had been put in to decrease the grade, the Marshall car was waiting.

"Hide your horses behind those rocks there, and get in with us," Marshall directed.

Bert hesitated. He had little mind to give up Chief and his new saddle, but knowledge that he would soon be overhauled by the officers caused him to obey the order. Presently they climbed into the back seat, and the car started slowly up the grade. Young Finney looked back eagerly toward the pursuing car, but Bert's gaze was largely fixed upon the back of a most delicious looking neck.

Once the girl turned around, and Bert looked away in embarrassment, acutely conscious of his swollen and painful face.

"Gee, they're a-tearin'!" Pat ejaculated, as the other car suddenly shot down the winding road into the lava bowl.

"We will be in a minute," Marshall said unconcernedly. Now that he was on comparatively level ground again, his car picked up speed and the two youths were treated to the fastest ride of their lives. By the time the other car came in sight again, Marshall had a lead of more than a mile.

"Wonder if they know we're in here," Pat asked.

"Sure they do. They couldn't have helped seeing you there in the back when we came out of the bowl," Marshall said.

They were now in a country of ruination. Half of the ground was covered with lava rocks in all kinds of weird formations, through which the road twisted and turned in all sorts of crooked curves, but always in the general direction of the Flying M ranch lying against the foothills ten miles ahead. It was a road for skilled driving.

Marshall was slowing down. "You boys jump out, and be careful to leave no tracks. Hide in the lavas here till that car goes by; then walk back and get your horses," he directed. "Come on to my ranch immediately, but keep away from the road."

"Just what's the idee, Mr. Marshall," Bert demanded.

"I'm trying to keep you from going to jail, that's all. Possibly in gratitude for you licking Ike Blunt," Marshall

said crisply; and both boys jumped out of the car.

"Linn, what's the meaning of this strange adventure," Lucy Marshall demanded, as they resumed the speedy pace. "I never knew you were a lawbreaker before."

"I'm not breaking the law, my dear. It's not a crime to overtake two young fellows on the road and give them a ride is it?" Marshall smiled.

"But you knew that young ruffian had been fighting. You knew he was accused of theft, and you say he is one of the notorious King Creek Coles. Why should you help him?" the girl insisted.

"From perfectly selfish motives I assure you."

"Then I'm ashamed of you," the girl said.

"I've let you know, Sis, that I have been subject to all sorts of annoyances for the last two years. I believe Ike Blunt is at the bottom of it. So for one thing it did my soul good to see that bully get such a licking, and, believe me, he got a good one. This Cole can fight."

"How old is he?" Lucy asked curiously.

"About twenty-one I should say."

"You don't really expect him to show up at the ranch, do you?"

"I really couldn't say," her brother replied. "I can hardly comprehend a Cole turning down anything in the way of help, however. So I think he'll be here."

"And what will you do with him—you can't keep him hidden forever."

"I won't try if I find out he is guilty. But whatever other things he may have stolen I'm sure he didn't break into Blunt's store. I saw his face when he was accused of it, and there was too much surprise there," Marshall stated matter of factly.

"And then what?" the sister persisted. "You said you had selfish motives."

"I'm going to give him a job," Linn laughed.

"I don't understand. He comes from bad people, and is a thief if not a burglar. Why do you want him? Surely you can find better men," Lucy protested.

"I haven't told you much about it, but I have been losing a lot of cattle lately."

"But what has that got to do with young Cole?"

"A thief to catch a thief," Linn said laconically.

"You think you can trust him?"

"I can trust him to get in touch with the crooks without delay," Linn said sardonically. "If it's the Coles who are stealing my cattle they'll be tickled at having one of themselves on the ranch. If it's other people they won't be long in getting young Cole to act as a spy for them."

"But how——"

"I'll know who to watch. Now I don't," Linn stated.

There ensued a period of silence.

"Linn, do you think it fair to this boy to deliberately place him in the way of temptation?" Lucy demanded.

"Why not? He's a King Creek Cole. He'd soon be in trouble anyway."

Marshall drove the car into his own yard, stopped for his sister to get out, and proceeded to put the car away in the garage. Lucy started toward the house and then changed her mind as she saw the car that had followed them from Snowville begin to turn into the ranch. She returned to the small gate in the picket fence that protected the yard, and waited.

THERE were four men in the car, and they all leaped out as the car came to a stop. The local deputy sheriff, who was also marshall of Snowville, strode ahead of his cohorts with blazing indignation.

"What've yuh done with them burglars, Marshall?" he boomed, as the ranch man came from his garage.

"Burglars? Surely, Mr. Goddard, you don't expect to find burglars here," Marshall said quietly.

"Yuh're damn' smart, an' all that, but this is one time yuh stepped on yoreself," George Goddard said heavily. "It's the law yuh're buckin' now. Where are they?"

"You think there are burglars on my place?"

"We seen 'em in the back seat o' yore car," Goddard said threateningly.

"Oh, well, then, have a look," Marshall invited.

The four men strode across to the garage, and then came back to where Linn had joined his sister.

"All they is to it is we take them fellers back to town or we take you," Goddard bullied.

"Good," Linn said crisply. "I've been wanting you to make a break that would let me get a chance to take you into court. Too much authority has gone to your head."

The officer was noticeably taken aback. "Well, I'm goin' to search yore place," he said.

"Help yourself," Linn agreed.

Led by Goddard the men looked all through the outbuildings, and around the hay stacks. They were convinced that the men they sought were hidden somewhere about the place. Failing to find them Goddard started toward the house.

"Hold up!" Linn snapped. "You've gone far enough. You don't enter my house without a warrant."

Goddard stopped in perplexity. "Then they're in there, eh?" he said maliciously.

"Who are you referring to?" Linn countered.

"Young Cole an' the Finney kid, o' course."

"Lucy, I wonder if he don't mean those two boys who rode with us about a quarter of a mile back along the road?" Linn said wonderingly.

"It might be," Lucy said noncommittally.

"Look here, Miss, what become of 'em?" Goddard roared.

"Why, they left the car miles back along the road," the girl said, and had to smile at the look of baffled fury on the officer's face.

"You people'll pay fer this trick," the man thundered, shaking his fist at Linn. Then climbing into the car with his escort he turned around and drove back toward Snowville.

"Linn, won't this mad trick get you into trouble?" Lucy asked anxiously. "You have interfered with an officer."

"I'd like nothing better than to have Goddard explain in court where he was when Ike Blunt was going to whip the Finney boy," Linn answered.

"I've seen a fight coming with that crowd for a long time, and it might just as well begin now as later," he added.

Chapter III

THE PARIAH

WELL, they've done come an' went an' gone," young Pat Finney chuckled, as from behind a protecting wall of lava the two boys watched George Goddard's car on its way back to town.

"What I'm 'fraid of is it'll git the Marshalls in trouble," Bert worried.

"We should worry about them. Marshall's got money, an' anybody with money don't need to worry in this country," Pat declared.

"Mebbe not," Bert agreed without conviction. "Anyway, we'll just drift over to the Flyin' M an' see what Marshall has on his mind."

Not being sure that all the posse had returned to Snowville the boys waited until dark to approach the ranch, and then they advanced circumspectly. Finally, however, Bert knocked discreetly on the front door of the bunkhouse.

"Come in," boomed a voice.

A moment later Bert and Pat were squinting through the lamplight at the men sprawled in various poses in the comfortable and clean bunkhouse.

"H'lo, Pat—who's the animated sausage yuh brought with yuh?" demanded a lean young puncher, looking up from the pair of socks he was darning.

"Hello, Tom Chill," Pat grinned. "This here is Bert Cole—the lad who licked Ike Blunt an' two of his bouncers this afternoon," Pat introduced.

"Aw, quit yer kiddin'," Chill grinned.

Bert, keeping in the background, saw that Marshall had not told the men about the fight. He was later to learn that Marshall always kept strictly aloof from his men except where business was concerned. As a system it worked fairly well, but its weakness was that the rancher failed to get that personal loyalty from his men which the old time cattlemen valued so much.

"You one o' them King Creek Coles?" demanded a middle-aged man who was seated behind a table that seemed to serve as a desk.

Bert liked neither the speaker nor the tone of his voice. The man's pale blue eyes crackled with suspicion, and the upper lip, covered with a closely trimmed light brown mustache was lifted from a set of powerful but uneven teeth.

"I am," he answered evenly. "I'm a King Creek Cole."

A silence fell over the room. Mort Cupples stared icily over his desk at the battered young rider. Then, "G'wan up to the house—Linn wants to talk to yuh," he said.

"That's the foreman," Pat said when they were outside. "I stayed here a couple o' weeks last winter trappin' coyotes. He's purty damn' tough, so yuh wanta look out for him."

"I will," Bert promised readily.

A few minutes later the boys were standing awkwardly inside a better furnished room than either of them had ever seen.

Lucy Marshall was sitting on a piano bench with her hands folded gracefully across her lap. She leaned forward and gazed at Bert levelly. For a moment he stood the calm scrutiny, which did not degenerate into a stare, and then he shifted uneasily.

Marshall motioned them to a couch. "You fellows both maintained your innocence today," he stated. "Frankly, I think you were lying, but——"

Bert Cole was on his feet, and heading for the door.

"Wait," Marshall snapped. "I am giving you a chance."

"I don't want any chance from a man who calls me a liar," Bert said.

"One moment, please." The girl was speaking, and Bert paused with his hand on the door knob. "My brother didn't mean that," she said. "He told me not long ago that he helped you escape because he was convinced that you hadn't robbed that store. He merely made that remark to stir you up."

"Well, he did," Bert said.

"It was foolish of me," Marshall acknowledged. "I wanted to see how you would take it. I do believe you were telling the truth. Now sit down and tell me what we can do to make other people believe it."

Reluctantly Bert returned to the couch. Pat began volubly to explain the origin of the charge. "It was all on account o' them gloves we bought. Blunt had kept out one pair for himself, an' the linin' was exactly like that in the gloves we got. Must 'a' been he bought his from Widowboga's squaw, too."

"Then it should be easy to prove the truth by getting the squaw," Lucy said. "She'll help you, won't she?"

"I dunno," Pat said despondently. "Yuh can't git nothin' outa 'em. They just shut up like clams."

"And you can prove an alibi only by your folks?" Linn said to Bert.

"All I need is time to git back on the reservation and find that squaw," Bert said.

"I apologize for what I said just now," Linn said. "Would you like to have a job riding?"

"Steady?" Bert asked eagerly.

"Yes, steady."

Bert's eyes were gleaming. A steady job riding was the one thing he wanted. He had trained himself for it; knew that there was no better man in the country than himself; yet always he had failed to get steady work.

"I'd like nothing better, Mr. Marshall, an' I'll do my work," he said earnestly.

"All right; you can go to work in the morning," Linn said.

"What about Pat?" Bert asked.

"Well, I can use him around the place," Marshall said after some hesitation.

"But we'll have to git ourselves clear of this other thing, won't we?" Bert asked.

"I don't think it will be necessary," Linn smiled bleakly. "I'll go into Snowville in the morning and have a talk with Ike Blunt. I'm inclined to think he'll drop the charges. If he don't we'll try to clear you."

"I certainly appreciate it, Mr. Marshall," Bert said feelingly.

"That's all right. I'll go out to the bunkhouse with you, and explain things to Mort Cupples," Linn offered.

THE next morning Bert became a full fledged cowpuncher. Immediately after breakfast he was assigned a string of six saddle horses, and given a bed.

"I want you to go with Tom Chill to rep fer us on Sheepshead Mountain," Mort Cupples said. "The main outfit over there belongs to old Enoch Cole. He's a relation o' yours, ain't he?"

"Yes, he's my uncle—but I never met him," Bert answered.

"Well, I guess there ain't nobody crazy about knowin' the damned old hog," the foreman sneered.

A few minutes later Bert and Tom were almost ready to travel. Pat Finney came up grinning. "Somebody wants to see yuh over the other side the granary," he announced.

Wonderingly Bert went around the high building and found Lucy Marshall

waiting for him. Feeling that there had been a mistake made, or that Pat was playing a joke, he started to turn back, when the girl called.

"Just a minute, please."

He was painfully conscious of his torn shirt and bruised face as he faced the girl in her fresh, morning house dress.

"Mr. Cole," she said tremulously, "I want to warn you. I can't give you any details, but you are going to be in great danger."

"I am?" he asked in amazement. "Oh—on account of that burglary in Snowville?"

"No. Nothing to do with that. But the only way to play safe is for you to be—perfectly honest. Don't—don't listen to anybody's crooked propositions."

He saw that she was in earnest. "Well, really, Miss Marshall, I hadn't thought o' listenin' to anythin' o' the kind," he assured her.

"Then don't. I know you are a—that you are—that you were——"

"A King Creek Cole," he finished for her calmly. "I've been hearin' a lot about that lately."

"I—I didn't mean to give offense," Lucy said hastily. "But I know they'll try to get you involved in crooked deals, and—and I want you to keep straight."

Somehow she looked younger and less experienced than she had done the previous afternoon, and then she had looked adorable.

"I'll do my best to stay that way," he promised simply.

Their eyes met and clung. The girl forgot the bruised, beaten face, and saw only the innate honesty in his steady, gray eyes. Impulsively she extended her hand.

"I believe you, Bert. And when you say you'll stay that way I believe that you have always been straight—that the things they say about you are not true." Suddenly confused by her emotional outburst, she released her hand and ran toward the house.

But she had left behind her a most amazed and startled young man. The touch of her fingers had been like a galvanic shock. And her expression of faith had stirred him to the depths of his nature.

"Hell, I couldn't go crooked after that," he murmured.

Chapter IV

THE PROVING OF A PROPHECY

FOR a week Bert Cole had been riding on the Sheepshead Mountain roundup, and nothing of moment had happened except the usual routine of the occasion. Bert was happy at having a regular job, and his eye was keen for Flying M cattle. Much keener, it seemed, than Tom Chill's. There were not many of them to be sure, but Tom usually overlooked the few there were.

That, of itself, was somewhat mystifying to Bert; but there were other things which also hinted of strangeness. Sheepshead Mountain was almost a closed range. Soda River made a wide belt around both sides and one end of it, and the other end was guarded by an impassable cliff which ran from the river almost to the Double E ranch, the property of Enoch Cole.

Few strange cattle could get in there, and old Enoch saw to it that few of his own got out. The roundup should have been a very simple procedure; but it was not because the air was full of suspicion and unexpected enmity.

Enoch Cole did not appear, and Bert quickly learned that his uncle was confined to the house with an ailment whose nature Bert did not learn. But his foreman, Swede Anderson, was much on the job. A big, bony, tireless man, he set a pace which it took a real man to follow. Anderson seemed to have plenty of men of his own, but the number of reps was unusually large, and entirely out of proportion to the number of cattle belonging to their outfits.

From the first Bert observed that few of the reps were inclined to submit to Anderson's authority. More than once he saw little groups of them talking things over some place instead of carrying out Anderson's orders. He was aware that Anderson knew it, for the foreman nearly always sent his own men back to comb the country the second time. And, so far as Bert knew, he made no complaint. One of the men who was inclined to sluff his work was Tom Chill.

Bert was not long in picking out the men chiefly responsible for the loafing. The principal one was a man he had known slightly for a couple of years, though never had he actually exchanged

words with him. Babe Colatta had ridden for several outfits since coming to Snowville, and he was a tophand. He was also a gambler and a gunman, and when not working most of his time was spent in Ike Blunt's saloon. He was handsome, quick and graceful in his movements, and domineering. Just now Colatta was riding for a small cattle outfit known as the Hammer Brand, owned by Gord and Gus Leach. Colatta, it seemed to Bert, did everything in his power to hinder Anderson's work.

Then one day Bert happened to become separated from his pardner for the day. Losing sight of the other riders he turned back toward a brushy ridge which he was sure had been neglected. In a little cove he suddenly encountered a bunch of twenty or so cattle. They were breathing hard, and he guessed that they had just escaped from some rider. In a moment he had whooped them out, and started them down the draw toward the rodeo. Almost at once he noted that none of them wore the Double E brand. Most of them had the Hammer Brand.

He was trying to puzzle out the reason for this when there came the report of a rifle, and a bullet passed by unpleasantly close to his nose.

He gave a yell of warning, and continued with the cattle, but the next shot was even closer than the first. There was no mistaking now that somebody was sniping at him, and if he continued with the cattle he would be hit. He abandoned them and took to the brush.

He was riding a buckskin horse that day, and as he loped through the timber out of sight it occurred to him that Swede Anderson had also saddled a buckskin that morning. Had somebody mistaken him for Swede?

At any rate he determined to find out who that somebody was. As soon as he was out of sight he turned down the ridge at a breakneck pace, and presently turned back at about the point where he judged the cattle would have drifted if left alone.

He had not thought of men being after the cattle, but barely in time to avoid detection he brought Buck to a halt as he saw two men turning the cattle back. He recognized them instantly as Gus and Gord Leach. Neither man had been seen at the roundup.

Completely perplexed, Bert watched the men driving the cattle back, and then he was startled by another shot not far below him. He realized quickly that he was not the intended victim of that shot, for Babe Colatta, Tom Chill and another rep by the name of Jarvis were in plain sight, and they were firing as a signal for the Leach brothers to stop.

Bert watched the men come together and talk. There was no chance for him to get close to them without being seen, but after twenty minutes of conversation the Leach brothers rode away toward the bridge over Soda River, and the other three men turned down toward the rodeo. The cattle had vanished into the brush, and no effort was made to find them.

Bert needed no second sight to tell him that there was something wrong about the affair. Every critter found on that ridge should have been driven to the rodeo that afternoon. He was remembering Lucy Marshall's warning that he would be approached with crooked proposals. So far nothing like that had happened, but he wondered how long it would be. The sensible thing was to ride on about his business; but he had a burning desire to find out just why the cattle had not been gathered in. Indeed, he wondered how such a comparatively large bunch should happen to be there with no Double E's among them.

HALF a mile from where he had been watching he rode out and joined the three men. Tom Chill, he observed, was nervous. Jarvis looked peevish; but Babe Colatta only honored him with a cold, calculating glance.

"You fellers see anything of a bunch of Hammer brands up that way?" Bert asked easily.

"No," Jarvis answered gruffly.

"Funny thing. I was siftin' 'em out o' the brush when all at once lead commenced to fly all around me. Considerin' it an' invitation to leave 'em be I did. Couldn't pick 'em up afterward," he explained.

He saw Tom Chill looked anxiously toward Colatta.

"Didn't you see anybody?" Colatta demanded.

"Later on I did. I saw Gus an' Gord Leach."

"The hell yuh did? Anybody else?" Colatta rasped.

"Only you fellows."

"Yuh must 'a' been dreamin' things, because Gord an' Gus are at the ranch," Babe Colatta declared.

"Funny, when I'd 'a' swore I seen you three fellows talkin' to 'em just a few minutes ago," Bert grinned.

Babe Colatta's hand flashed out and seized the buckskin's bridle rein, jerking it to a stop. The other men halted also.

"There's just one thing that's more dangerous than spyin' on me, an' that's shootin' off yore mouth about it," Colatta gritted. "Right now I'm tempted to scatter yore brains."

"Go ahead," Bert invited calmly. "I know yore reputation as a gunman, but I'm willing to back my own speed in a showdown."

Babe Colatta's jaw dropped. Defiance was the last thing he had expected. Certainly he had never looked for it to come in such a cool manner.

"Yuh see," Tom Chill broke in hurriedly, "I told yuh this kid was all to the good. Damn it, he licked Ike Blunt, Bummer Kelly, an' Slant Wickison in a fist fight. Linn Marshall himself seen him do it. Now he don't back down from you. Give him a chance."

Colatta's hand had been resting on the handle of his gun, but he brought it away slowly. "You're a King Creek Cole, ain't yuh?" he demanded.

"Yuh're damn' right I am," Bert said evenly, "and proud of it."

"I've never had any use for yore tribe, but they may be better men than I think," Colatta said slowly. "What do yuh think about old Enoch Cole?"

"I don't know him," Bert answered.

"Yore folks have allus been poor an' hard up. Old Enoch is rich. Did he ever offer to help yuh out with a cent?"

"He never did." Bert knew nothing of the feud between his own father and Enoch Cole, but he did know that Alf Cole hated his wealthy brother, and never spoke of him except with sarcasm.

"No; and he never helped anybody else out. Instead, he always hogged everything in sight. Yuh ain't got no cause to love him," Colatta said.

"I don't."

"Then we'll let yuh in on something good," Colatta declared with the air of one granting a great concession. "There's a big scheme in the wind that'll make thousands o' dollars fer everybody that's in on it. Not piker stealin's like you fellers have always pulled off. There's big men in it, an' a lot of 'em. Don't think we're givin' you the details till we know we kin trust yuh, but the first step in our campaign is to have old Enoch an' his foreman arrested fer stealin' cattle."

"I see. They'll be accused of rustlin' these outside cattle that don't show up in the rodeos," Bert said.

Something like that," Colatta agreed. "Now that yuh know what's up we wanta know where yuh stand. Do yuh go in with us an' keep yore mouth shut —or what?"

BERT wondered how Lucy Marshall had known that he would be tempted this way—or was he tempted? He was smiling gently, and none of them guessed the resentment that was surging through him. Possible profits did not occur to him at all, but the idea that they thought he would yield to the first crooked proposition put up to him was worse than a reflection upon his honor; it was an insult to his intelligence.

At the same time his common sense warned him to be prudent. A flat refusal meant an immediate gunfight with Babe Colatta. And even if he should be fortunate enough to beat Colatta to the draw one of the other men would probably get him. In a way Tom Chill had been his pardner for the past week, and Bert felt a repugnance to fighting with him. Chill was rather likeable; weak rather than vicious. Yet if he agreed to go in with the outlaws he was justifying their belief that a King Creek Cole was inherently crooked. Worse than that he would be making a mock of Lucy Marshall's faith in him.

"It's a big thing, Bert," Tom Chill wheedled. "There'll be fifteen or twenty thousand dollars in it for everybody, won't there, Babe?"

"I don't know. It'll depend on how much we can grab," Colatta said curtly. "But there's this fer yuh to understand: You take orders absolutely, an' no back talk goes. Do you understand that?"

"I think I do," Bert murmured. "Who do I take the orders from?"

"From me for the present," Colatta rasped.

"All right. What do we do next?"

"We ride down an' tell Swede Anderson we combed this country up here thoroughly an' there's nothin' here. An' you keep yore mouth shut," Colatta said tersely, and spurred his horse forward.

Bert dropped in behind with Tom Chill. He had passively agreed to become an outlaw, or so they understood. But in his mind the thought was raging that some day he was going to frustrate whatever plan the outlaws had in mind. And as he looked at Babe Colatta's slim, straight back he had a premonition that some day or other he was going to have to shoot it out with that man.

In the meantime his job was to find out as much of the outlaws' plans as he could.

He knew better than to try to question Colatta or Jarvis, or to quizz Tom Chill when they were present.

"I been tryin' to git Babe to take yuh in ever since we got here," Tom said in a guarded voice. "He was afraid yuh didn't have nerve enough, but I reckon yuh showed yuh had today. Man, do yuh know that yuh was right ready to say, 'Good mornin', Peter!' when yuh talked back to Babe? Nobody else in this country would dast do it. It was all right this time fer a bluff, but don't yuh ever go tryin' it again or he'll git yuh." The advice was earnestly given.

"Is he as poisonous as all that?" Bert asked with interest.

"He's worse. Wait till yuh see him in action with a gun. You can fight all right, I reckon, but Babe don't use his fists."

Low as their voices had been Colatta looked around, and Bert knew that he had heard.

Bert and Tom waited in the background while Colatta blandly explained to Swede Anderson that they had seen no cattle.

Anderson listened with grave attention, but only nodded when Colatta had finished. Anderson was little given to words, and Bert noticed that Babe Colatta was not altogether at ease. The gunman did not like people to be too noncommittal in his presence.

Bert slept little that night. Men were rolled up in their blankets all around him. How many of them were honest men, how many crooks, he wondered? He knew that Babe Colatta had not accepted him absolutely, and he felt sure that Colatta would have other members of his gang watching him. Not knowing who they were he would have to be most circumspect. He felt, too, that Colatta would not forgive him easily for having talked back to him.

The next morning Swede Anderson surprised Bert by ordering him to help the horse wrangler with the cavvy that day. Babe Colatta was in hearing distance, and the gunman gave Bert a glance of warning. Bert nodded slightly and smiled, and Colatta rode away, apparently satisfied.

BERT was little surprised when Swede Anderson rode up to him a couple of hours later.

"I've been noticin' you, young feller, an' I see yo're a hard worker," Swede said. "I wish I could say as much for some of these other reps. As a matter of fact they haven't got any business here at all if we wanted to keep 'em out. This is all private range. Did yuh know that?"

"No, I didn't," Bert said, wondering why Swede should vouchsafe the information to him.

"Yore uncle holds a ninety-nine year lease on this from the Government through an old Indian treaty, an' we could keep these fellows out if we wanted to be ornery."

"You know I'm a Cole then," Bert said.

"Certainly. One o' the King Creek Coles. Frankly, I'm surprised to find yuh such a good hand. I understood they was plumb shif'less, but yo're a tophand all right," Swede said.

"I've tried hard to learn everything about this range business that I could," Bert said modestly. "But this is the first time I've ever had a steady job."

"An' if I follered orders yuh wouldn't have that," Swede grinned. "Mebbe yuh ain't heard that old Enoch has give orders not to let any Cole on his land."

"No, I hadn't," Bert admitted.

"Well, what he don't know don't hurt him," the foreman said. "As long as you work like yuh have worked I won't kick. But I am curious to know how yuh come to ride in yesterday afternoon with no cattle. I'd 'a' swore there was some up there."

So this was what the man had been driving at, and with a covert threat to send him home if he refused to talk!

"Didn't Babe Colatta tell yuh?" Bert asked innocently.

"He did, an' frankly I think he was lyin'. It wouldn't be the first time that outfit has failed to bring in cattle, an' I'm curious to know why."

Bert looked at the foreman searchingly. Of all the men he had seen on this roundup he trusted Swede Anderson most. Should he take his uncle's foreman into his confidence, or play the game alone? He suddenly decided that it was due Anderson to know what had been going on.

"There were cattle there," he stated calmly. "Gord an' Gus Leach brought them, an' they shot at me when I tried to bring 'em in. Later, I met these other fellows an' they told me to keep shut about it on pain of death."

"Then, my Gawd, what're yuh tellin' me for?" Swede demanded.

"Because I'm tryin' to be straight. My people have a bad reputation, an' I'm tryin' to live it down," simply.

For a long minute Anderson was silent. "Kid, I believe yuh," he said finally. "Anything else yuh want to tell me?"

Bert proceeded to tell exactly what had happened the previous afternoon, omitting only his own defiance of Babe Colatta.

"Kid, I appreciate this, an' to keep yuh outa trouble I'm goin' to talk nasty to yuh whenever Colatta is around. I'll admit I'm afraid of him. But to make it up to yuh I'm goin' to do my damndest to get old Enoch to realize what a nephew he's got. He needs an heir, an' damned if I don't think you'll fill the bill," Anderson said.

"I don't want any of his money, but I do want people to know that I'm on the level," Bert said candidly.

"Kid, I believe it. An' between the two of us, we'll put a kink in the plans of these damn' crooks," Anderson said, and rode away.

Visions of a complete vindication of the Cole name filled Bert's thoughts the remainder of the day. He permitted his mind to roam at large in the field of possibilities, not only of checking the schemes of the outlaws, but of winning the respect and admiration of Lucy Marshall. He had not thought of falling in love with her; he had been squelched too much to dream of aspiring to anyone so fine as this educated, refined girl. But it was pleasant to think of her none the less.

That afternoon Swede Anderson failed to show up at the rodeo. While the work of cutting out went on two of his men slipped quietly away to look for him. They found his horse coming toward camp with the bridle reins dragging, and by following its tracks they found the foreman—with a bullet in his heart.

From their description of the place where Anderson was found, Bert knew that the foreman must have gone back to look for the bunch of Hammer Brand cattle the Leach brothers had brought to the range.

Bert looked surreptitiously at Babe Colatta, and found the gunman's eyes upon him in cold appraisal.

Every man was questioned, and each man seemed able to establish an alibi, but in Bert's mind it was a certainty that Anderson had been killed by either Babe Colatta, or the Leach brothers. And he knew that Colatta either guessed or knew that he had told Anderson about the cattle.

He was certainly getting mixed up in things, and he had some reason to believe that he might soon expect to meet Swede Anderson's fate.

Chapter V

THE BIG HOUSE ON THE HILL

THE roundup had swung in close to the Double E ranch when Swede Anderson was murdered. Four of his men took the body to the ranch, and the rest of the roundup crew sat around the fire behind the mess wagon in gloomy silence. The men were tired, but they did not care to roll into their blankets as early as usual. Violent death under most any circumstances can shake men's nerves.

With most of the crew Swede Anderson had been popular, and there were low murmurings which boded ill for the murderer if he was ever discovered.

It developed that Bert Cole had been the last man to see Anderson alive, or at least no one would admit having seen the foreman after he had talked with

Bert. The other horse wrangler had seen him there, but had not exchanged words with him.

Bert had offered to accompany the body to the ranch, but the offer had been curtly declined by Hack Woolums, a puncher for the Double E, who had taken it upon himself to assume charge.

"I reckon the whole damned outfit will git a chance to talk when the sheriff an' the coroner gits out here," Woolums said. "I ain't above sayin' that there's been men on this roundup who have been makin' it tough fer Swede from the beginnin'," he added bitterly.

"The roundup ain't been on the level, an' I'll swear to that," Babe Colatta had spoken up evenly.

"Yeah, an' whose fault's it been?" Woolums demanded; then suddenly colored up and turned away as he met Colatta's cold stare.

That night Bert chose his sleeping place with unusual care. If anyone approached him in the night he felt sure they would have to make noise enough to wake him up. He was laying out his blankets when Tom Chill came up and joined him. No one else was close around.

"Fer Gawd's sake did yuh tell Anderson about them cattle?" Tom whispered.

"I reckon I'll do my talkin' to the coroner," Bert said blandly.

"Now don't git uppish with me, bo," Chill snarled. "It ain't healthy."

"Why, yo're half scared to death right now that this crooked deal will come out, an' yuh'll be roped in," Bert told this fellow calmly. "Yuh're not lookin' for trouble with me, an' yuh know it."

"By Gawd, you are a cool proposition," Chill murmured. "An' I don't want no trouble. I come out here just to warn yuh to keep away from Babe. I don't know whether he killed Swede or not, but I do know he slipped back to keep watch on you when Swede sent yuh with the cavvy."

"Then I haven't any doubt he killed Anderson," Bert declared.

"Well, for Gawd's sake keep yore opinions to yoreself," Tom wailed. "Yuh can't prove it, an' Babe'll git yuh shore as the world. On the other hand there's a big bunch o' dough in it fer you if yuh're in with us."

"It's a fine promise, but I don't know a damn' thing about it. How'm I to know it ain't all bluff?"

"I don't know, neither, but I do know there's some big men in this. The only way they can make it work is to have quite a crew. That's how you come to git in. I tried to git yuh in the beginnin', but Babe didn't think yuh had the stuff in yuh. Lord knows nobody ever dreamed yuh'd turn honest, an' I don't believe yet that yuh told Swede about them cattle," Tom affirmed.

"He tried to git me to tell, all right," Bert admitted. "Threatened to send me home if I didn't. Said old Enoch Cole had give orders that none of my folks could come on his range. That looks like he might 'a' guessed about them cattle, don't it?" Bert said earnestly, as he suddenly saw a way to divert suspicion from himself for the time being.

"Sure it does," Tom said, much relieved. "I'll explain to Babe. Yuh know I'm kinda vouchin' fer you, an' it'd mean trouble fer me if yuh tried to throw us down."

Here was an angle to the case which Bert had not considered. He was determined to fight Colatta and his gang with every means in his power, but it was going to be hard to get Tom Chill into trouble.

"Look here, Tom; is anybody else of this gang workin' for Marshall?" he asked abruptly.

"Don't let on to anybody that I told yuh, but Mort Cupples is."

"I'm not so much surprised," Bert said slowly. "In fact I think I begin to see what we're drivin' at. It's a big cattle stealin' plan, ain't it?"

"Partly, but not all," Chill affirmed. "O' course that'll be our job when we git the orders, but the big money comes from somethin' else. Honest, I don't know what it's all about, but I do know that old Enoch Cole an' Linn Marshall is mixed up in it some way."

"Look here, Tom; don't yuh know this rustlin' an' so on ain't right—aside from the danger there is in it?" Bert argued.

"Now, damned if yuh ain't got me all suspicious of yuh again," Tom complained. "Yuh may be right at that. If I had it to do over I might lay out. But now I'm in, an' I've gotta stay, an' so have you. We wouldn't either of us live forty-eight hours if they suspected us."

"I guess that's right," Bert sighed.

"An' I suppose the money will come in handy."

"That's the spirit," Tom applauded, and took his departure.

FOR hours Bert tried to figure out in just what way Linn Marshall could be concerned in the affair. Not as a member of Colatta's gang he was sure. It must be then as a prospective victim. And then was another incentive for Bert to fight the gang. He owed Marshall a debt of gratitude for helping him escape from Snowville, and also for giving him his first chance to make good. Not only that, he had a deep feeling that to betray the man who paid him wages was one of the basest of crimes. And last, but not least, Linn was Lucy Marshall's brother.

His uncle was a different proposition. All his life he had been tought to sneer at any mention of Enoch Cole's name. His father, he remembered, had always taken a delight in making insulting remarks about Enoch. He recalled, with no idea of what it portended, that his mother had never liked to hear it. Sometimes she ventured to protest, but more often she drew her strong, erect figure up in silent, rigid protest.

Lately, Bert had begun to see his father as he was—a lazy, characterless man. Was it not possible that Enoch Cole had a reason for hating his brother? Whatever the merits of the family quarrel Bert was feeling a keen desire to meet this wealthy uncle of his, whom rumor declared to be a recluse and a miser. But he now knew that Enoch Cole would never see him if he knew in advance who he was. He determined to find some way to interview Enoch Cole in the near future.

His most pressing problem, however, was to decide upon the way he would treat Babe Colatta. The gunman might accept Tom Chill's explanation of his interview with Swede Anderson, but he doubted it. The man was more likely to demand a direct report, and he would not accept inferences as he had done before.

In a few short hours, also, he would be asked to tell his story under oath. He had to make up his mind now whether to tell the truth, or to stick to the story of what he had led Tom Chill to believe had taken place between himself and the dead foreman.

If he told the truth he had not one scintilla of evidence to support it. The few members of the gang he knew would deny it, and he would be discredited. He would have made dangerous enemies without achieving any results. Clearly the proper thing to do was to pretend to be a faithful member of the gang until he found an opportunity to strike at it, and then strike hard.

Having made up his mind what to do he turned over on his side and went to sleep.

When he awoke at daybreak the next morning he promptly rolled out and began to draw on his overalls. He had folded them under his head the night before, but as he shook them out he saw a scrap of paper pinned to the bottom of one leg. He sat back and gazed at it wonderingly. Despite his precaution someone had put that paper there during the night. Slowly he unpinned the paper and read the penciled words:

A closed mouth is a sure sign of wisdom.

He smiled. The warning could not have been more clearly given. He did not need a signature to tell him the paper had been attached to his pants leg by Babe Colatta. It was only a new evidence of the dangerous character of the man. It meant, however, that Colatta really did not anticipate any treachery from Bert.

While the rodeo was in progress that afternoon a deputy sheriff arrived with Hack Woolums with subpoenas for Bert, Joe Rain, who was the regular horse wrangler, and Babe Colatta. The inquest was to be held at the Double E ranch, and it was deemed that they would be the only witnesses required, since the men who had found Anderson's body were already at the ranch.

Bert could understand why he and Joe Rain should be called, since they were the last people to see Swede Anderson alive, but the summoning of Colatta was a puzzle. One rather thrilling prospect, however, was that he was pretty likely to see his eccentric uncle.

THE Double E ranch buildings stood on a bit of elevated ground overlooking Soda River. On a bit of swampy ground next the river, perhaps a quarter of a mile from the

ranch-house, was the ruins of an old fort. Back of the buildings stretched acre upon acre of hay land. With an abundant water supply available Enoch Cole had spared no effort to raise enough hay to winter his numerous cattle. There were barns and sheds of all kinds, and the low land along the river appeared to be pasture land; but Bert was mostly interested in the actual dwelling place of his uncle.

In the first place the house was set off from the other buildings by a high slab fence that surrounded it and was so carefully kept up that every knothole was covered. There was but a single gate, and it was a ponderous affair which could be locked and barred. The house itself, from outside the stockade, appeared to be a large, two story affair with a sort of cupola in the top. And that was all that Bert got to see of it.

Anderson's body lay in a small house just outside the stockade, where the foreman had lived. Not far away was a long, wide bunkhouse. Men were strolling about the yard between the buildings nervously as the party from the range rode up.

The inquest, it seemed, was in progress in the smaller house. Bert was summoned inside immediately. He looked around the room curiously, and his gaze came to rest upon the features of the dead man. A lump came into his throat. He liked Anderson, and had the foreman lived things might have taken a far different turn.

There were six or eight men in the room, but the man Bert sought was not there. He had never seen Enoch Cole, but none of the men present answered his description at all. He was promptly sworn in and questioned.

"You are said to be the last man to see Swede Anderson alive," he was told. "Did he tell you where he was going?"

"He did not."

"What did he say to you?"

"I don't remember—everything," Bert said.

"Young man, you can't sidestep. Why did Anderson leave his work and come back to talk to you? He did talk to you, didn't he?"

"He did."

"And not to Joe Rain."

"No. I didn't see him talk to Joe, anyway."

"Then tell us why he did this peculiar thing. Something was in the air. He had some powerful motive for coming to see you. We know that. He went from there to his death. You are a fugitive from justice yourself. It looks bad. Now explain this thing if you can," was the order of the examiner.

"All right. I'll tell you what he had to say to me. He said my uncle, Enoch Cole, had given orders that none of the King Creek Coles could ride on his range. He said he liked the way I worked, and advised me not to let my uncle know I was here. That was why he put me to wranglin' horses," Bert explained.

The apparently candid, straightforward statement made an impression. He was questioned further, but he stuck to the statement, and refused to say that there had been anything else. He was excused.

JOE RAIN was called, but his testimony failed to throw any light on the subject. Anderson had come out to where the horses were held to talk to Bert Cole, for he had not spoken to Joe.

"Let Colatta in," ordered the sheriff, and the dark, good looking gunman was admitted.

Colatta gave one swift glance around the room, and then was at ease. Bert sensed the uneasiness of the other men, even the coroner and the sheriff. Colatta was a more dominating personality than any of them. Then, suddenly Bert began to think of his own affairs.

Linn Marshall had promised to have the charge of burglary dismissed, but it seemed that he had failed. True enough, Bert had not been arrested, but he had been told that he was a fugitive from justice, so doubtless he would be soon.

Colatta was being examined. Every man present was leaning forward with intense interest.

"You are said to be a killer, Mr. Colatta. Is that true?"

"I reckon I've been compelled to kill a few men in my time, but I've never been convicted of murder," the man smiled.

"But with an avowed killer at large where an innocent man is shot down in cold blood you understand that it is natural for people to demand that that killer explain his whereabouts. Colatta where were you when Anderson was

killed?" The question snapped out like the crack of a whip.

"If I'm suspected of this murder why didn't you tell me so I could have had witnesses here to prove my alibi?" Colatta retorted coolly.

"Never mind the witnesses. You tell us where you were and we'll check up on the witnesses, if there are any."

By this time everyone was completely absorbed in the examination of the colorful witness. Bert Cole had been slowly edging toward the door. He opened it gently until it was just wide enough for him to slide through. No one seemed to notice him. He slipped out, and gently pulled the door shut behind him.

He looked around cautiously. There were a score of men around the bunkhouse, ranch laborers mostly. They looked at him expectantly, but apparently he meant no more to them than any other witness.

"Anything important happened in there?" one man asked.

"They're accusin' Babe Colatta of the murder," Bert answered cannily.

"Good Lord!" The fellow swung on his heels and hastened to spread the news.

Bert walked over to his horse. He had ridden Chief that day, and swinging on to the little sorrel, he circled the palisade. He had observed that the one gate was closed, or rather it stood ajar some six or eight inches, but there was a padlock on the heavy chain which fastened it, and on a huge block of wood which served as stool sat an unwinking old Chinaman. Bert sensed that it would be folly to try to talk his way past the Oriental, but he was determined to get inside that stockade.

The slabs were about twelve feet high, and the stockade had been built to secure privacy, with perhaps little idea that it would ever be needed for defense. Bert rode around to the side next the river, stopped his horse, and stood up in the saddle. It was an easy matter to reach up and grasp the top of a slab, and then draw himself to the top. But he had no more than done so than there was a shrill whistle from the glassed in cupola on top of the huge, weather-beaten house.

The Chinaman on guard at the gate leaped up as though someone had touched him with a lighted match, and in a moment he was running toward Bert, gesticulating and jabbering. Bert was surprised to see how powerfully the Chinaman was built. He was no longer young, but he was almost a giant in stature, and the muscles on his huge, bare forearms stood out like braided cables. And almost simultaneously with the whistle another Chinaman popped out of the back door of the house. This one was much smaller than the other, but the big meat cleaver in his hand made him a formidable looking antagonist.

It was not an appealing looking prospect, but after one careful look around Bert seized the top of a slab firmly and let himself down—on the inside.

(*Part II of* COLE OF KING CREEK *appears next issue.*)

Seven Devils

by Charles E. Barnes

Author of "The Valley of Peril," The Long Un and Runt stories, etc.

With only a slim clue to guide them, Long Un and The Runt searched for the most despicable thief they had ever known. They found him—but for once the partners dared not exact the justice that was due.

"HEY there, Long Un, old Pinchpenny is wantin' yuh over at the house. Reckon he's gonna fire yuh fer lettin' that heifer break a leg."

The voice came from the HP bunkhouse door and was followed by another from the far corner.

"He'll fine yuh a month's pay, an' yuh only got three weeks comin'."

"More like he'll want that black hoss o' yourn to even up."

"Break his doggone neck, Long Un, an' we'll stand off the sheriff."

Prediction and advice came from all parts of the big bunkhouse but passed over the head of the long man. Seated on the edge of a bunk, he was engaged in too serious an occupation to let any small thing disturb him. His mind was concentrated on what he called "weavin' a toe cap." Not until he had drawn the yarn through for the last time, and with an air of profound satisfaction regarded the puckery bunch of wool where had been a hole in his best pair of socks, did he give any sign that he heard. As he crammed the rejuvenated sock into a bulging gunnysack his sober eyes began to twinkle.

"I figger he's wantin' to know how come there was only eleven bottles in that case o' whisky you fellers brought from town," he said as he got up and prepared to answer the call from the boss.

"Whisky Jim cheated him, that's all," declared Red Perry. " 'Sides, you don't know nothin' 'bout that, an' yuh can't tell him nothin'."

"Yeah, mebbe," Long Un drawled from the doorway, "but next time don't yuh leave the empty bottle layin' right in the middle o' the road. Happen he got there first, there'd be more'n me he'd be wantin' to see."

With a grin at the blank look his remark brought to several of the faces on the bunkhouse benches, Long Un turned away to answer the summons from the ranch-house. He found the boss in the room he called his office. Hiram Pawson's thin lipped mouth under the long upper lip looked more than ever like a steel trap, but, instead of the storm cloud Long Un expected to see, his hard face expressed a certain satisfaction.

When the big man entered and, without speaking, took up a lounging position against the wall, Pawson eyed him keenly for a moment, then asked abruptly, "Do you know the Clearwater Valley?"

"Not to say it," Long Un replied. "I been through there oncet."

"Do you know the Box Two Bar ranch?"

"I know 'bout where 'tis."

"I want you to ride over there tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"Widow Corbett owns the Box Two Bar, an' she owes me two thousand dollars. I want you to get it."

"Yeah."

"I'm figurin' she won't have the money."

"Then how'm I gonna git it?"

"If she ain't got the money—an' 'cordin' to all I hear, she's on her last legs an' can't get it—she's to give me her Morgan stallion to pay the debt."

"Yeah, I've heard o' that hoss. He's worth a durn sight more'n two thousand dollars."

"Don't I know it?" Pawson was rubbing his hands together as though rolling between them something choice. "If she's got the money, of course you gotta take it, but I'm countin' on that horse. You get over there tomorrow, an' see you come back with one or t'other."

Long Un looked anything but pleased with his job. " 'Sposin' she won't give me the hoss, I ain't gittin' in a scrap with no woman," he objected gruffly.

"She'll give you the horse, all right," Pawson assured him. "She's like all the rest o' the Corbetts—thinks they're the only people in the world that's honest, allus braggin' how no Corbett ever went back on his word. If she ain't got the money she'd give yuh the horse if it was the last thing she owned. She's a fool, but if it wa'n't for the fools a wise man couldn't scratch a livin'. A woman ain't got no right to own the best stud in the county, anyhow. Mebbe she'll wish she'd sold when I wanted to buy. You can take that pardner o' your'n along with yuh, an' see yuh come back with that horse."

"It's a long ride—we'll have to put up at Clearwater over night."

"There ain't no use o' spendin' money in Clearwater," Pawson snapped. "Start early an' you can make the Box Two Bar time enough to eat an' bunk in. That's another way the Corbetts was allus wastin' their money—keepin' a free boardin' house, braggin' they never let a man go by their place hungry. You got your orders. Take these receipts. One's for the money, case she's got it, an' t'other's for the horse. I reckon it's the one for the horse you'll give her. Now get out, an' mind yuh, I don't want no loafin' in Clearwater."

IT WAS a long ride to Clearwater Valley and, being unfamiliar with the country, the partners had not taken the shortest route. It was dark before, following the directions given them at the last ranch they had passed, they turned into the notch through which the road ran to the Box Two Bar. Both men and horses were tired and for some time they had plodded along in silence. When Long Un spoke, it was with a sudden emphasis which showed that his mind had been busy.

"I'm durned if I like this idee o' spongin' on a woman we're gonna rob," he declared.

"What do yuh mean, rob?" the Runt inquired.

"Pinchpenny says as how she ain't got no money, an' we're gonna take her stallion. Ain't that robbin' her?"

"It sure is," the Runt agreed.

"Mebbe he's wrong an' she's got the money," Long Un suggested hopefully after a long pause. "If she has, we'll git it an' hike back to Clearwater."

"An' if she ain't, we'll hike anyhow," said the Runt. "We'll tell her we'll be back in the mornin' fer the hoss. That'll give her a chance to lose him some'ers."

Long Un shook his head. "She won't lose him," he said. " 'Cordin' to Pinchpenny she's one o' them people that figgers they gotta keep their word if they starve."

" 'Pears like if she gives up that hoss, that's what she's gonna do. Yuh rec'lect what that feller down the road was tellin' us—this hoss is 'bout the last thing she's got. It don't stand to reason she's gonna give up a hoss that's worth twice as much as she owes."

"Reckon that's jest what she's gonna do."

"Huh!" The Runt was silent a moment. "Damn that old miser, anyhow!" Another pause. "Tell yuh what. I ain't gonna work no more fer that old skinflint. I'll steal the hoss in the mornin' —you kin show up in the afternoon an' there won't be no hoss to take— What the hell!"

"Seven devils!"

The second exclamation came from a man who, rounding a bend in the road at a dead run, had not entirely escaped a collision with the Runt's horse. There was a moment of confusion, during which the Runt's language addressed to the stranger was calculated to pierce the hide of a rhinoceros, but after his one exclamation, the man did not make a sound. Having worked his horse past the partners, he suddenly struck in his spurs and set off at a furious pace.

"'Pears like that feller wants to git some'ers," said Long Un after watching the rider's shadowy figure until it was swallowed up in the darkness.

"Darn his measly hide," growled the Runt. "He woudn't git nowhere if he'd waited a minute more. I wisht I could 'a' seen his face. I'd 'a' rounded him up tomorrer an' done somethin' more'n talk to him."

FIFTEEN minutes later they passed through a gate which stood open, and a little farther on could make out the dark outline of a house, but there was no light to be seen anywhere.

"'Pears like everybody's asleep," said Long Un. "It's a doggone shame to haul a woman out o' bed to tell her yuh've come to steal her bread an' butter, but I reckon it's gotta be done, an' then we'll git back to Clearwater."

Dismounting in front of the house, Long Un knocked on the door and, after waiting some time and hearing no movement, he knocked again. His heavy fist was like a battering ram and made a noise that should have waked the seven sleepers, but he got no response.

"Nobody to hum," he decided. "Reckon we might as well git along an' come back tomorrer."

"There's a light," said the Runt, who had not dismounted, "looks like somebody comin' with a lantern."

The light was some distance away, but after watching it for a moment they saw it was coming nearer. The Runt climbed down from his horse and, seated on the steps, they waited.

Before they could see her face they made out that the lantern bearer was a woman. She noticed the horses first, and hesitated an instant, then, raising her lantern, peered about and discovered the partners, who had risen and were standing by the steps.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but be you the widder Corbett?" Long Un inquired.

"Yes, I am, an' who are you?" she asked, stepping closer.

"We're workin' fer old Pinchpenny Pawson," Long Un explained, "an' he sent us over here sayin' as how you would be payin' some money yuh owed him."

"Have yuh got Pawson's receipt?"

"Yeah, he give us a receipt to give yuh in case yuh paid."

"Have yuh come all the way today?"

"Yeah."

"Then yuh must be tired an' powerful hungry—but mebbe yuh stopped at Clearwater."

"No'm, but we was figgerin' on gittin' back there."

"You'll do no such thing! Take this lantern an' put your horses away. The corral's over by the barn an' there's some hay inside. Then you come in the house an' I'll have somethin' ready fer you to eat."

"We wa'n't figgerin' on stoppin', ma'am," Long Un protested. "We gotta git back to Clearwater most important. Yuh kin give us the money now, or we kin come back tomorrer.

"You do as I tell yuh," she answered sharply. "You can't do nothin' in Clearwater tonight 'cept gamble, an' yuh ain't gonna gamble with my money. 'Sides," she added in a gentler tone, "we ain't never let a man go away from Corbett's hungry." She thrust the lantern into his hand and pointed in the direction of the barn. "Now, git along with yuh!" she concluded.

Half an hour later the partners were congratulating themselves that the widow had refused to listen to their protest. They were seated at the kitchen table before plates piled high with eggs and crisp bacon, flanked by huge cups filled with scalding hot coffee. The appeal to their empty stomachs was strong, but Long Un felt decidedly uneasy. He had seen enough to tell him that rumors of the widow's poverty were not exaggerated. The posts of the corral fence were rotted. The hay in the barn loft was but a wisp of wild swamp grass. By the barn he had noticed a wagon which would fall to pieces if robbed of its liberal wrappings of hay wire. Here in the house were many signs of former prosperity, but just as many indicating that period was long past.

Long Un had not liked his errand at any time, and every minute since his arrival it had grown more distasteful. The more he saw of the Box Two Bar, the more he doubted the woman's ability to pay, and that he had been sent deliberately to take advantage of her poverty to rob her of her last resource made him feel uncomfortably hot. He was eating with no apparent thought but the need of appeasing his hunger, but under his

sober, calm exterior he was furious.

When Mrs. Corbett had placed everything before them she sat down at the opposite side of the table. She was long past middle age, her shoulders stooped, her face was lined and careworn, but there was both strength and pride in the poise of her head and in her calm, steady eyes. For some minutes she watched the partners without speaking, then asked abruptly, "Did Pawson figure I'd pay you the money?"

"No'm, he didn't," Long Un replied.

"He told you not to figure on gettin' the money, but to bring home my Morgan stallion."

"Well, yeah, it was somethin' like that."

"Do you know what that horse is worth?"

"Reckon I do—a durn' sight more'n two thousand dollars."

"Two thousand is all I owe Pawson."

"Lookahere, ma'am," Long Un dropped his knife and fork and for the first time looked straight into the woman's eyes. "You ain't gonna be fool enough to give him that hoss fer a debt of two thousand dollars!"

"Didn't he tell you to take the horse if I couldn't pay the money?"

"Yes, he did, but I ain't gonna take him 'less yuh say so, an', beggin' yer pardon, yuh'd be a dang' fool if yuh done it."

The faintest smile appeared on her lips for an instant, then she threw back her head proudly. "That was in the bargain," she said. "A body that'd back out of a bargain when they found they had holt o' the little end wouldn't be no better'n a thief. No Corbett ain't ever been dishonest an' we ain't gonna begin now."

Long Un subsided, but his somber face plainly said he was not convinced. "What's gittin' me," he said after a long silence, "is why yuh don't sell the hoss an' pay Pinchpenny. Thataway yuh'd have somethin' left."

"I promised Pawson once that I wouldn't sell the horse to nobody but him."

"Damn!" Long Un muttered under his breath.

"But you don't need to worry," she went on. "He ain't gonna get the horse. I've got the money."

Long Un's face brightened perceptibly. "Yuh got the money!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I've got it, an' I'm gonna give it to yuh right now. I been worried 'bout havin' it in the house, but I'll give it to you an' you can give me the receipt. Then I won't be responsible—my debt'll be paid."

"Yes'm, that'll let you out."

MRS. CORBETT left the room and the partners, their minds much relieved, devoted their entire attention to finishing their meal. They were pushing back their chairs when she reappeared in the doorway. She stopped on the sill and clutched with both hands at the casing, swaying as though she would fall. It was then they noticed that her face was ghastly white. Both men sprang at once to her assistance.

"It's gone!" she said hoarsely, pushing Long Un away as he would have taken hold of her.

"Gone!" Long Un gasped.

"Gone!" the Runt echoed.

"Yes, it's gone." Then with a swift glance of suspicion at the two men, "Did you men take that money so I'd have to give you my horse?" she demanded.

"We ain't took no money!" Long Un protested indignantly.

"We ain't no low down thieves!" the Runt added.

"It was here when I went up to Harper's just 'fore dark, an' there ain't been nobody here but you. I believe you stole it so's yuh'd get that horse," she persisted.

"That's where yo're wrong," said Long Un. "There was another feller here jest 'fore we come. We met him a little piece down the road. He was ridin' hell bent fer some'ers."

"An' he had the manners of a hoss-thief," the Runt put in.

"If yore money's been stole I reckon that feller took it," Long Un concluded. "He's the only one could 'a' done it."

Mrs. Corbett had sunk into a chair and for some minutes she sat with her hands covering her face. She remained so long without sound or motion the partners were beginning to feel vastly uneasy. Finally she dropped her hands in her lap. Her face was still very pale, and her eyes had a hurt look that made the two men want to swear, but appar-

ently she had regained her self control. She looked steadily into their faces for a moment, then spoke in a tired voice as if she was weary with struggling.

"Mebbe there was another man, an' mebbe you took it; I dunno. It don't make much difference. If I couldn't pay Pawson his money today he was to take the stallion. You can take him away in the mornin'. I can give you a bed an' breakfast. Mebbe it'll make yuh sleep sounder to know you've stole from a woman her last dollar."

"I ain't blamin' yuh none fer takin' it hard," Long Un returned gravely, "an' mebbe it's only nat'rell, us bein' strangers an' bein' kinda hitched up with a lowdown coyote like Pinchpenny Pawson, yuh pick us out fer the fellers that done it. We ain't holdin' it ag'in' yuh, but we don't want yer bed. We gotta ride. We're gonna find yore money, an' we're gonna bring that feller back with a rope on his neck. Happen we might eat yer breakfast if yuh got plenty o' them eggs an' bacon."

He could not tell if she heard him, or if, hearing, she had understood. She did not speak, but continued to stare at him with the hurt, despairing look in her eyes that made him want to murder somebody. And so the partners left her, carrying away with them a picture which clung to them an drew from them many an oath during their long ride.

Rounding the bend where they had met the hurried rider, the Runt spoke for the first time since leaving the house.

"I wisht I'd 'a' broke that feller's neck when he run into me," he growled. "It'd saved a lot o' trouble."

"Yeah," Long Un agreed.

"A feller that'd steal from a woman, an' a pore widder woman at that, orter be boiled in oil."

"Yeah."

"Or mebbe skinned alive 'fore he's hung."

"Yeah."

"Or tied with his feet in a fire."

"Yeah."

"I'm gonna do all them things to him."

"Yeah."

"But how do yuh figger we're gonna find him? We don't even know what the skunk looks like."

"If somebody was to give yuh two thousand dollars, what would yuh be doin' first thing?"

"I'd be gittin' some'ers where I could spend it."

"Yeah—yuh'd hit fer town—an' I figger 'bout this time o' night mebbe yuh'd be in bed."

"Not with two thousand dollars in my jeans—not much! Money ain't no good when yo're asleep."

"Mebbe yuh'd be hangin' onto yer money waitin' fer the bank to open in the mornin'."

"Not if there was an hombre in that town that figgered he knowed how to play stud."

"Yeah, an' yuh'd be playin 'till daylight happen yuh didn't git broke before. That's where we're gonna find the feller we're lookin' fer."

"'Tain't a bad bet—reckon it's a two to one chance," the Runt allowed.

OUT of consideration for their horses they rode slowly. It was after midnight when they pulled up in front of the Straight Flush, Clearwater's premier saloon and gambling hall. The rest of the town was asleep, but here the lights were still burning, and the sound of voices coming through the open windows brought a grunt of satisfaction from the Runt as they dismounted at the hitching rail.

Three horses already stood there, heads hanging, half asleep, pictures of dumb patience. The partners examined them with keen interest. All they knew of the horse they had met on the road was that it was dark in color and had a pronounced white blaze. One of these was a bay, and he had a blaze that ran the length of his nose. Long Un passed his hand over the horse's neck. It was dry, but the matted hair told of hard riding some hours earlier. Not very conclusive evidence, but encouraging.

"There's plenty o' bay hosses with white faces," Long Un remarked, "but I'm thinkin' we're purty good guessers. I figger that's his hoss, but we gotta do some hefty guessin' to pick out the right feller."

It was not a busy hour at the Straight Flush. Only a few nighthawks remained in the big saloon and these were gathered at the faro table which ran along one side of the room. A few minutes spent in watching the players were enough to convince the partners their

man was not there. The bets, without exception, were small, and the dealer handled the cards with the listless air of a man bored with a game which had furnished no excitement. Moving to the bar they called for a drink.

"Guess nobody ain't dropped dead from excitement 'round here tonight," Long Un drawled as he poured out his liquor.

"Been pretty slow," the bartender admitted.

"Ain't there no poker goin'—somethin' to keep a feller awake?"

"Are yuh wantin' to git in a game?"

"We had leanin's thataway."

"Go through that door," said the bartender, pointing to a door at the end of the bar, "an' down to the last room. Yuh'll find what yo're lookin' fer in there, but it won't do yuh no good less yo're loaded. It's a sky limit."

"The sky ain't high enough fer us when we got the notion," Long Un assured him.

The door indicated by the bartender gave entrance to a passage lit only by the light which came through an open door at the far end. Voices also reached them, indicating a number of men. The partners had taken but a few steps along the passage when there came a sudden burst of laughter, above which they heard a petulant voice exclaiming, "Seven devils! I'd 'a' swore I had yuh beat!"

Long Un glanced at the Runt and solemnly closed one eye. The Runt grinned. Cautiously stealing to the edge of the door they peered in. There were four men seated around the table in the center of the small room. After a rapid survey, Long Un pulled the Runt back to a safe distance from the open door.

" 'Tain't the feller that's jest won the pot," he whispered, "an' 'tain't that big feller. It's one o' the other two, but how in Sam Hill are we gonna know which?"

Their brief glance into the room had shown them that these other two men were radically different. One had red hair, a freckled face and mean looking, close set eyes. The other was black haired, with a sullen cast of countenance and weak looking mouth. But they were of the same height and build and, in the dark, would look very much alike. It was a toss up between them.

"Reckon we gotta set in an' find out who's got the most money," Long Un added.

"We ain't got no money to set in that game," the Runt replied. "Jest come with me an' I'll show yuh the right feller in two minutes."

Long Un looked doubtful, but as the Runt at once started for the open door, this time making rather more noise than was necessary, the big man followed and said nothing.

WHEN they entered the red-headed man was dealing. He threw an indifferent glance at the partners without pausing in his rapid motions; but when the Runt pulled a chair up to the table and sat down, he stopped and looked across at the little man with a scowl.

"This ain't no open game," he said. "It's fer real money. If yuh set in here yuh gotta have the stuff."

"Mebbe I don't look it, hombre," the Runt drawled, "but I got the stuff to clean yuh down to yer shirt."

He leaned back and his hand went down to his pocket. It came up again, but, instead of money, it held a six-gun which seemed to cover them all at the same time.

"Jest keep yer hands on the table, gents, where I kin see 'em, an' don't nobody open yer mouth to talk loud, 'less yer wantin' to swaller a pill that's like to hurt yer digestion."

"What in hell do yuh call this— a holdup?" The big man demanded fiercely, but careful not to raise his voice.

"Yuh might call it that 'thout tellin' no lie," the Runt allowed, "but you ain't the feller I'm after. I sure hate to break up a interestin' game, but I'm gonna take Seven Devils away from yuh. Him an' me's got somethin' to settle, an' it's gotta be settled pronto."

Three of the men, moved by the same impulse of curiosity, turned their eyes with a swift look of inquiry to the young, black haired man. The Runt, following the direction of their gaze, met the young man's puzzled look with a grin.

"What in hell are yuh talkin' about?" the man demanded, his black eyes searching the Runt's cherub features. "I never seen yuh before."

"Mebbe yuh ain't got as good eyes as me fer seein' in the dark," the Runt

suggested, "but I seen you."

The man gave a visible start, and at the Runt's next words his face went a sickly gray as the blood drained from under his tan.

"Looks like yuh been winnin'," said the Runt, "but yuh got two thousand dollars there what don't belong to yuh. Hand it over."

"Like hell I will!" he exclaimed, then appealed to the other players. "Are you fellers gonta let him rob me like that? I don't know him—never seen him. He's runnin' a big bluff—are yuh gonta let him get away with it?"

"Them fellers ain't got nothin' to say 'bout it," the Runt informed him before the others could answer. "If yuh don't hand over that money pronto, I'll tell 'em where yuh got it."

Since, apparently, this strange little man had no evil designs on them or their money, the other players were showing no concern. They sat perfectly quiet, their hands well forward on the table, the only expression on their faces that of intense curiosity. The black haired man looked appealingly from one to the other, then, for some reason, decided he did not wish them to know where his money came from. Slowly he counted out two thousand dollars from the pile of bills in front of him, and pushed them over to the Runt.

"Take it, yuh damned thief!" he snarled. "Now I s'pose you're through."

"We're through with the roundup," said the Runt, stuffing the money into his pocket, "but we ain't done the brandin'. Jest so's there won't be no accidents, my pardner'll collect the artillery, an' then yo're gonna take a ride with us."

Long Un on entering the room had softly closed the door, and finding a key in the lock, had turned it and put it in his pocket. He now came to the table and, beginning with the big man, took the gun from his belt and swiftly passed his hand over his clothing in search of hidden weapons.

The black haired man with suddenly assumed indifference was arranging the money he had left on the table—a very respectable looking pile—and, having sorted it, he folded the bills and reached for his pocket. The next instant his hand flashed to the front, there was a report, but it was not his gun that spoke. He had tried to beat the Runt at his own game and failed. The only thing he gained was a hole in his arm.

"Me an' my pardner don't never joke," the Runt announced quietly. "Happen anybody heard that noise out in the saloon an' comes poundin' on the door, you fellers'll tell 'em to mind their business an' git to hell out o' here."

Long Un at this moment completed his search and threw the last gun out of the window. Seizing the black haired man by the collar he hauled him over to the wall.

"Git out o' the winder, Runt," he said, "an' I'll chuck this coyote out to yuh."

A few minutes later, three men riding abreast left the last houses of Clearwater behind them. The shot that hit his arm had taken all the fight out of the black haired man, and he was sullenly silent as he rode between the two partners, but when they turned north at the fork of the road, he asked with a startled air, "Where are you fellers takin' me?"

"We're takin' yuh back to let the widder Corbett see what kind of a low-down skunk stole her money," Long Un informed him.

They rode some minutes in silence before the man spoke again. "Looka-here," he said, speaking eagerly, "if it's only the two thousand you're holdin' me up for, you've got it. I got pretty near as much more, an' I'll give yuh the whole of it if you'll let me go."

"Shut up!" was Long Un's gruff answer.

"I was only borrowin' it anyhow," the man went on. "I was gonna take it back."

"If you open your trap ag'in, young feller, we'll hang yuh to the first tree we come to." Long Un spoke as if he meant a real rope and a real tree, and thereafter they rode in silence.

In the gray light of early morning they crossed a small stream and stopped to water the horses. The Runt, seeing that the prisoner's wounded arm was giving him considerable pain, washed and bound up the hole he had made, though he was none too gentle in handling it. He went so far as to improvise a sling, but when helping the man to the saddle, he growled savagely, "I dunno what fer I'm doin' this, 'cause after the widder's done with yuh, I'm gonna put so many holes in yer measly carcass the wind'll blow through yuh."

THE sun was not yet over the eastern ridge, but smoke curling up from the widow Corbett's kitchen chimney told them that, early as it was, she was already up. Visions of the promised breakfast were in that smoke, and the Runt murmured feelingly, "Um-m—eggs an' bacon!"

Long Un said nothing, but his eyes looked a little brighter. "Gimme that money," he said as they pulled up at the house, "an' you bring that feller in."

With the money in his hand, he went around the house to the kitchen door which he found open. Mrs. Corbett was working over the stove. She looked up as Long Un came through the door, and the big man stopped short, shocked by the ravages the night had made in her old face. Her eyes, deep sunken in black hollows, were dull and lifeless. There was a curiously still look about her, as if suffering had left her without power to resist. She stared at Long Un as though his appearance made no impression on her tired brain.

Confused for a moment, Long Un stood still, then advanced eagerly, holding out his fist full of bills.

"Yuh don't need to do no more worryin', ma'am," he said, "I've got yer money."

She seemed not to understand. With unchanging expression she continued to stare at him with eyes which might have been blind for all the sign they gave of seeing. A sudden fear seized Long Un that her mind had given way.

"Don't yuh savvy, ma'am? I got yer money," he repeated anxiously, "the hull two thousand. It's jest like it never was stole."

At last he saw a light spring into her eyes, a look of joy quickly changing to anxiety, but it was not for him nor for the money in his hand. She was looking past him toward the door.

"Billy, son!" she cried, in an instant vitally alive. "What's the matter? You been hurt!"

Long Un turned quickly. The Runt and his prisoner were just within the door. The little man had found difficulty in persuading the man to enter the house, and had practically carried him in. Obviously, to Mrs. Corbett it had the appearance of helping a seriously wounded and helpless man. She was by his side in an instant, her hands fluttering tenderly over his wounded arm and her old eyes peering anxiously into his haggard face. The Runt, dumbfounded, had released his hold, and with a comical look of bewilderment on his chubby face, stared at the widow, at the man she called her son, and lastly at Long Un. The spell was broken by the man himself.

"Let me alone, Mother!" he said petulantly. "'Tain't nothin'. I'm all right."

But she was not to be put aside. With a pathetic effort to support him, she led him to a chair. Not until he was seated did she appear to remember the presence of the other men.

"This is my boy, Billy," she said, turning to Long Un, and there was an indefinable pride in the way she lifted her old head. "How did he get hurt, an' how did it come you brought him home?"

"We run into him in Clearwater," Long Un answered in a dazed voice.

"He don't live at home," she explained. "He's got a job in Clearwater. It was mighty good o' you to look after him." Then, noticing the bills Long Un still held in his hand, her mind seemed to go back and grasp what he had come to tell her. Her face brightened. "You got the money, an' now I can pay Pawson," she said, and there was a note of immense satisfaction in her voice. "Did you catch the thief?"

"Yeah—we caught him."

"What did you do with him? I wanta see the man who could be low down mean enough to steal a woman's last dollar." Then a thought struck her. "Did you have a fight? Was that where Billy got hurt?" she asked.

"Yeah—that's where he got hit."

"I'm glad he had somethin' to do with gettin' it back," she said, with a glance of pride at the bent head of the man in the chair. "If he'd been home, no thief could 'a' taken it. What did you do with the dirty dog? Is he in jail?"

"No'm—he ain't in jail."

"You didn't kill him!"

"No'm—we didn't kill him."

"Then where is he?"

LONG UN shifted uneasily on his feet. He glanced at the Runt and met only a blank stare. He avoided looking in the direction of their late prisoner, but he could feel the man's eyes burning into him. Finally his eyes came back to the woman's face,

and for a moment he gravely studied her before answering.

"Well, yuh see, ma'am," he said at length, "we caught the feller an' made him give up the money, an' then we was gonna bring him here an' let yuh see us horsewhip him or hang him—whatever yuh said. But that feller got away. Yeah, he got plumb away. Yuh see it was dark an' our hosses was tired. But that feller knowed what was comin' to him, an' I figger he ain't gonna do no more stealin'. He had a chance to git acquainted with my pardner an' me, an' he knows it ain't safe to try no more lowdown tricks. Next time my pardner an' me'll find him anywhere this side o' hell, an' we'll hang him first an' let him do his explainin' down below where he belongs. There's yer receipt, ma'am, an' if yuh take my advice, don't have nothin' more to do with Pinchpenny Pawson, an' don't keep no more money in the house. Reckon we'll be movin'."

"But you can't go without eatin'," she protested. "You set right down an' I'll have breakfast cooked in a jiffy."

"We can't stop, ma'am, we jest plumb gotta go."

"Nonsense! I won't have it! You've been the best friends I ever had—you've saved me from the poorhouse. I can't never thank you, but I'm sure gonna feed you."

"Next time we're over this way, mebbe we'll stop in, but now we jest gotta go," Long Un repeated obstinately, and without giving her a chance for further protest, he strode out of the kitchen. The Runt overtook him as he was mounting his horse.

"Yuh longlegged son of a Kansas grasshopper!" the little man stormed. "Have yuh gone clean crazy? Or did them eggs an' bacon give yuh the belly-ache? If yuh've give up eatin' yerself, yuh might rec'lect I'm holler clean down to my toes!"

Long Un paused with one foot in the stirrup and his answer came hot and savage. "Runt, if I was to eat breakfast here, there'd be an accident happen to 'Billy, son,' an' the widder's had troubles enough!"

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by Kenneth Gilbert

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Pop Bennett's new partners were peculiar men. One took a malicious pleasure in practical joking; while the other was on the verge of madness from fear of skunks. But at the end of that night of strife and terror, old Pop smiled—for the first time in the memory of man.

"HOW much?" asked old Pop Bennett, picking an article from the display counter of the hardware store at Cinnabar. The thing he held in his hand was an ordinary mousetrap—a flat piece of wood with a strong wire spring which snapped viciously when the trigger was released.

"A short bit," replied the storekeeper. Then he added, with a grin, "You and your new pardners goin' after big game? Or, maybe you're goin' to catch one of those hydrophobia skunks that feller Darrah is always talkin' about?"

But Pop Bennett, if he saw humor in the remark, did not smile. It was said in the desert and hill country that no man had ever seen him smile; it was one of the traditions of the land, in fact. Nor would they see him smile, it was further said, until he found the El Dorado of which he dreamed and often talked. True, he had found gold, but only in quantities as to enable him to eke out a bare existence while he prospected for more of the yellow metal.

So now he merely shook his head. "Pack rats gettin' to be suthin' awful in this country," he explained. "Last trip out one of 'em stole my jackknife—the knife I'd carried nigh onto forty year—and left a shiny piece of quartz in its place. Now, if that quartz had turned out to be free millin gold——

"But it didn't, of course. So I aim to surprise the next varmint that comes around swappin' things with me when I'm asleep. I'll tie a string on this trap, and I reckon Mr. Pack Rat will be waitin' there for me when I wake up."

The storekeeper's grin broadened to a sudden cackle of laughter, but Pop Bennett regarded him owlishly, with an expression of pained surprise. Then the old man fished a dime from a pocket of his soiled overalls, laid it on the counter, and stalked toward the door in ruffled dignity. Not yet would the grizzled, bewhiskered old prospector smile.

"Just one word, Pop," called the storekeeper, moving after his customer. "These two new pardners, Trapp and Darrah. Know anything about 'em?" he asked in a lowered tone.

The old man shook his head. "Why should I?" he demanded. "Reckon I don't know how to get along in this world? Figger I ask a man for a letter of recommendation before I can make up my mind about him?" His tone became slightly truculent.

The storekeeper shook his head, shrugged, but said nothing more. There was nothing else he could say. The old prospector went out.

At the hitch rack, he joined two other men who had been waiting for him. He clucked to his own laden burro, and Pop Bennett was on his way once more to the hills, with two new partners; and high hopes that this trip would be the fateful one of which he had dreamed all these years.

A STICK of wood in the fire broke apart with a muffled snap, and flared up brightly, driving back the encroaching night shadows. At the sound, lank Bill Trapp sat up with

a nervous start, and stared at the half covered face of his partner, Tom Darrah, who was sleeping next to him. On the other side of the fire was the blanketed form of old Pop Bennett; and Trapp's eyes turned upon this speculatively, but it did not move.

Darrah stirred, and Trapp bent toward him. "Awake?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. Darrah's lids parted instantly; he sat up, throwing off his blankets.

"Think I ever sleep?" he demanded grouchily. "Yuh know darned well I dassent, when I'm out in the hills like this. Them cussed hydrophoby skunks is everywhere up here. Me, I've been bit twice already; and the third bite's allus fatal. Yuh know that, Trapp, and yet yuh ask me if I'm awake!"

He paused, and his eyes turned toward Bennett who lay in the dreamless sleep of the just. Then he turned to Trapp once more. "Gimme yore tobacco!" he said, fishing a packet of brown cigarette papers from his shirt pocket.

Trapp's eyes twinkled; he had been waiting for this, knowing that his partner's tobacco was low or already gone. He fumbled inside his shirt, and brought forth a small tobacco sack, and watched with quizzical, narrowed eyes while Darrah rolled a cigarette. At last the operation was finished, and a live coal furnished the needed fire. Darrah drew the smoke deeply into his lungs, closing his eyes in anticipation of its soothing delight.

Instantly, however, he broke into a fit of coughing, and hurled the offending weed into the fire, while he jumped up and stood wrathfully over his partner. "Yuh plumb fool!" he charged, murder in his eyes at sight of the other's silent mirth. "What'd yuh put into that?" He grimaced his distaste. "Some time," he said ominously, "I'm goin' to kill yuh, Trapp! You'll go too far with yore fool jokes.

"I ain't forgotten what yuh did last night, either. Yuh know how my nerves is all shot to pieces when I get into the hills where them hydrophoby skunks is all about. Yet yuh went and wet a corner of my blanket, and rubbed it on my cheek, makin' me think it was the cold nose of a p'ison skunk. I hadn't got over it when yuh drawed a cold pack rope across my hand, makin' me think it was a rattlesnake. And now yuh fix up a sack of tobacco for me!"

He paused, breathing quickly, his eyes deadly in their intensity. "I'm warnin' yuh, Trapp," he went on, still in the same low tone. "I'll kill yuh the next time yuh play a trick on me. We've been pardners for a long time, and I've been the butt of your infernal humor. But, by the blue, blinkin' flarin' blazes, if yuh——"

But Trapp, still unable to mask his grin, held up a hand for silence. "Just a minute," he said soothingly, yet he watched the other narrowly, for Darrah meant business, and Trapp knew that his partner had already proved himself a killer when aroused. "Yuh'll wake *him!*" And he jabbed his thumb in the direction of the sleeping Bennett. "There's somethin' we've got to talk over."

"If yo're up to any more tricks—" hinted Darrah darkly; but Trapp shook his head in denial. Trapp threw off his blankets, and Darrah squatted beside him.

They were unlike in size and looks, yet in their eyes was a common expression, now that both were serious. A certain shiftiness of glances, perhaps; a hint of cunning, which said that Trapp and Darrah were tricky, given to deceit, probably dishonest in the extreme. And these were the partners of old Pop Bennett.

As for Darrah, he was short, squat, red of hair and whisker; while Trapp was tall, smooth faced, solemn appearing. It was Trapp, usually the brains of the pair, who was doing the talking now.

"I've been figgerin' on talkin' this over with yuh all day," he said, "but I haven't had a chance. Likewise, I kinda wanted to get the thing worked out in my mind. The time has come, I reckon." He paused, then went on, "We've been up here in the hills about three weeks, pannin' the creeks, and findin' a pocket of gold now and then. How much yuh reckon we've got, all told?"

Darrah thought for a moment. "Maybe five thousand dollars' worth of the stuff," he replied. "Not so much, when it's cut three ways, but still—it's a sizeable sum at that, ain't it?"

Trapp nodded. "A sizeable sum, yes," he agreed. "And there's no assurance that we're goin' to find any more, either.

Besides, Darrah, I reckon yuh'd like to get out of these hills, away from the hydrophoby skunks—" and he grinned.

Darrah regarded him eagerly. "I'll go crazy, if I stay up here much longer!" he declared.

Trapp inclined his head sympathetically. "And that," said Trapp, "would be a downright shame." He was silent for a moment.

"Let's see, now," he resumed. "There's five thousand in nuggets and dust. And yuh're itchin' to get out of these hills. I'd like a taste of civilization myself." He paused questioningly.

"Well?" he asked.

Darrah stared back at his partner, understanding in his eyes. He was ready for any suggestion. His glance strayed to the sleeping Bennett—and back. "Well?" he echoed.

Trapp gathered his blankets around his shoulders. In the same whisper they had used throughout the dialogue, he said, "Tomorrow, maybe." Thereupon, he returned to his slumbers. Presently Darrah did likewise. Old Pop Bennett slept peacefully on.

MOUNTAINS ahead, and to left and right, with the air breathlessly still and blistering hot. The trail led along the winding course of a small river, and at the point where the three men stopped at noon, a spring, high up on a rock face, trickled thinly down until it formed a little creek which joined the larger stream. All three paused to quench their thirst; Trapp and Darrah drinking long and heavily, while old Pop Bennett scarcely more than wet his lips, for the sun was torrid, and there was still a long way to go before they made camp that night. The old prospector was more desert wise than his partners.

After that, Darrah stretched himself in the scant shade of a clump of sagebrush, and announced that he was going to rest. The burro which Bennett had brought along, was carrying full load, while the remainder of the outfit was distributed between the three men. Darrah's pack was no bigger than the others', but it had seemed to weigh tons as he trudged the last mile before reaching his place.

Old Bennett stroked his bewhiskered chin, and stared at the surrounding country, with its brown and gray hills, and rugged outcroppings of stone. "I'd like right well to stop here for a time, and prog around," he told his partners. "There's a lost mine somewheres in this neck of the woods. I haven't been through here for nigh onto ten year, but from what I heard tell of a location where a Mexican named Gonzalez found rich quartz and afterward lost the place, I'd say that it isn't far from where we are now."

Trapp, fanning himself with his hat, while he pulled lazily at a cigarette, frowned. "Too hot down here," he announced. "Me and Darrah want to get higher in the hills, where it's cooler. We'd rather stick to findin' placer gold than to fool around lookin' for quartz."

Old Pop nodded, but he wasn't satisfied. He went down and scanned the sandbars, sized up the benches where in ages past the river had flowed nearly a hundred feet farther up the slope than its present level. While he amused himself thus, Trapp, glad of the opportunity to rest, turned to regard his partner.

Darrah had fallen asleep, as a gentle snore proclaimed; and Trapp's eyes lighted. The smaller man's pack was lying on the ground, and Trapp picked it up, hefted it. "Too darned light," he told himself. "No reason why he shouldn't carry a man's size load, same as the rest of us." His eyes scanned the ground.

But he did not find just what he wanted. He observed that old Bennett was still busy down at the river, and that Darrah slept on. Trapp walked farther up the rock slide, still looking. Presently he found what he wanted, a somewhat round and seamed rock which weighed perhaps twenty-five pounds. Due to the action of frost the previous winter, it had been split off from the cliff above, and had rolled down here. Grinning maliciously, Trapp carried it back to where Darrah was lying.

There, Trapp cautiously removed half of the load of Darrah's pack, put the rock inside, and then covered it with the stuff once more. He was careful to do the job so that the pack appeared to be no larger, but when he hefted it now, a look of unholy joy came into his eyes. At that moment he observed Pop Bennett returning from the river.

"Maybe there's color on them bars," ventured the old prospector, "but we'll

save it until we come back this way. Yuh folks ready to move?"

Darrah, awakened by a kick from his partner's boot, got up yawning, cursing the heat. He stooped down, caught his pack—and staggered from the weight of it.

"Feels like it weighs a ton," he complained. "Wasn't half as heavy as that, seems like, when we started out."

"That's because yuh're tired," commented Pop Bennett. "Anyway, we haven't far to go before we make camp —not more'n five miles."

Darrah, with the doubly heavy pack on his shoulders, swore at the prospect. "Me, I'm dead tired from loss o' sleep," he complained. "Down here I dassent sleep on account of hydrophoby skunks. Yuh reckon they's any of 'em up where we're goin'?"

Pop Bennett might have smiled then, but he did not. Perhaps he, like so many prospectors, held that strange and unscientific belief with Darrah that all skunks of the desert country are afflicted with hydrophobia; that the first two bites from one of them is not necessarily fatal, but that the third bite is deadly. While it is probably true that occasionally one of the little striped night prowlers may be afflicted with the dread malady, as is the case with coyotes, for all skunks to have it would mean that the tribe would be quickly wiped out, the disease being invariably fatal except when it can be checked. That Darrah had a real fear of them, however, was not to be questioned.

"Skunks?" echoed Pop. "Well, I reckon they'll be up where we're goin', yes. But they never bit me."

"Well, I dunno as I can blame 'em," retorted Darrah savagely, with a meaning glance at the soiled and bewhiskered old desert rat. The heat and the tremendous weight of his pack, were getting on Darrah's nerves. More so, because it seemed that Trapp, who strode along easily enough with his own load, was smiling.

But at Darrah's remark, old Pop Bennett, devoid of humor as he was, did not smile. Nor did he indicate offense. There was an inscrutable, far away look in his eyes, as though he were busy with his own thoughts. And his thoughts might have been of his partners.

Not that he mistrusted Darrah and Trapp. Yet often he had caught them eyeing him queerly, and their proprietary interest in the little store of gold Pop had garnered—for neither Darrah or Trapp knew much of prospecting, and therefore were of little help—was a little too avid to suit him. Still, to Pop Bennett, partners were partners, and that's all there was to it.

High in the hills at last, they made camp when the coolness of dusk came.

DARRAH was in a murderous temper, and the hard pull with the overweighted pack had been a real drain upon his strength. The last two miles of it he had said nothing, but toiled ahead, and now he threw himself, almost exhausted, on the ground, while Pop unlashed the bed rolls from the burro's back. Even Trapp, to whom the thought of making Darrah carry the heavy rock all the way up here had seemed incredibly funny, now eyed his partner with slight misgiving. Darrah could be a demon when aroused, and Trapp wondered if there were not some way in which the rock could be extracted from Darrah's pack without the latter's knowing it. Trapp had planned at first to tell Darrah about the joke, and laugh at him, but now he changed his mind. The short and squat redheaded man with the basilisk eyes at this moment looked as though he would not appreciate the humor of the thing. Pondering a way in which he could get the rock out of Darrah's pack unseen, Trapp took a bucket and went to the nearby spring for water. In perhaps five minutes he returned, and observed that Pop Bennett was picketing the burro in a swale just below camp. Darrah was nowhere in sight.

Trapp put down the water bucket, and stared around in the fast-gathering gloom. He moved about the camp, wondering if Darrah had gone back down the trail or was out in the brush. Suddenly he stopped, for at his feet was Darrah's pack. It was open! Beside it was the heavy rock.

Trapp tensed, and turned quickly; but not quickly enough. For Darrah's voice, like the sibilant hiss of a snake, cut through the silence, "Trapp, I'm goin' to kill yuh!"

Darrah had stepped from behind a tree, his face black with anger, a gun in his right hand. Trapp, who had instinctively gone for his own weapon,

upon hearing his partner's voice, allowed his hand to drop, while his eyes, into which had crept sudden fear, bored into those of Darrah.

"I warned yuh, Trapp," went on Darrah, in the same husky whisper. "But yuh kept on. Yuh nearly killed me off, makin' me pack that heavy rock."

But Trapp broke in, "Just a joke." His voice was soothing, pleading; although his eyes never left the face of the other, and he was watchful for an opportunity. "Surely, yuh don't mean that yuh'd go so far as what yuh say?" Fear crept into his voice.

"Joke?" rasped Darrah. "No man can do what yuh've done, and live. I've sworn to kill yuh, Trapp, and I'm—" But at that instant, Trapp took a desperate chance.

With suddenness he dropped, reaching for his own gun; and Darrah's six-shooter blazed forth at the spot where he had been. Before Trapp could get out his weapon, Darrah had shot again, and the tall man's right arm went limp. But Trapp's next move confused Darrah; the tall man leaped for the shelter of a tree trunk. With this between him and Darrah, he plunged into the sheltering brush, back down the trail up which the three men had come. Darrah's gun roared after him, and then the thoroughly aroused little killer charged after his victim, into the half darkness.

Just the tail end of the tableau was seen by Pop Bennett when, at the first shot, he came hurrying up from the swale where he had picketed the burro. He saw Trapp go, and Darrah after him; he heard the thud of their boot-heels on the rocks for a moment; then silence came.

For five minutes he listened, and then, faintly, there came to his ears the sound of a distant shot. Another. But after that he heard nothing more.

Pop shook his head in bewildered fashion. The doings of these two men were beyond him. They were his partners, that was true, but there seemed something radically wrong with both of them. Uneasily, the old man set about preparing camp, not sure that maybe one or both of them were not dead. But there was nothing to be done in the night that had settled down. In the morning he'd have a look around. And, somehow, he was glad to be alone; for the first time he became aware that he had grown to fear both Trapp and Darrah. Their covetousness concerning the little store of gold——

That gave him a new thought, and he opened the pack where the gold was usually stored, wondering if it had been disturbed. But it was still there. More confidently, then, he made supper, and ate alone. After all, solitude was his dish; he had spent so many nights alone in the hills that he had grown to prefer it to the company of others. Still, Trapp and Darrah at the beginning had appeared to be all right. While he ate, he listened for further word of them, but none came. Yawning at last, he arranged the blankets to his liking, put more wood on the fire, and even set the mouse trap as a precaution against the depredation of a pack rat during the night. Thereafter, he composed himself for slumber.

IT SEEMED that he had barely closed his eyes when he opened them again, feeling that something was wrong. Yet he must have been asleep for nearly an hour, for the fire had burned down to a bed of glowing coals. And, standing there, eyeing him broodingly, was Darrah.

The redhaired man still carried the gun in his right hand, and his chest heaved as though from recent exertion. He was scratched and his clothing torn from running through the brush. In his face, his eyes, was a peculiar look that brought old Pop Bennett upright. But Darrah snarled.

"Keep quiet," he advised. "If yuh don't, I'll send yuh where I sent Trapp. First, I want yore gun, and then I want that gold, all of it!"

Pop's face clouded, and his lips tried to form words, but none came.

"Hear me?" demanded Darrah harshly. "Yore gun!"

Slowly the old man passed it over to the other, and the latter grunted, Knowing that Pop was now potentially harmless, Darrah ignored him, strode over to the pack containing the gold, brought forth the small but heavy poke. This he tossed on his own bed roll. Then, thrusting both guns inside his shirt, he took up the pack lashing.

"Put yore hands behind yore back!! he commanded. His face was gloomy, but his eyes had an unnerving glare in them. Pop obeyed, sensing that perhaps

with loss of sleep and being nagged by constant fear as Darrah had been, regarding the existence of hydrophobia skunks, the man probably was insane. So Pop submitted to being bound hand and foot.

"Yuh—killed—Trapp?" ventured the old man at last, as though half fearful of propounding the question, yet being unable to resist a sort of horrified curiosity.

Darrah scowled. "He got what was comin' to him, and that's what yuh'll get if yuh don't do as I tell you," Darrah retorted. "*Yuh* have no regrets comin'. He was goin' to do the same thing to yuh tonight!"

"And what are yuh goin' to do to me, Darrah?" queried the old man.

"Yuh won't know until the time comes," was the reply. "I'm waitin' for daylight, to get out of this place. *And I'm goin' alone!*"

He stretched himself on his bedroll, facing the old man who, bound, lay opposite him. In one hand Darrah clutched the buckskin sack containing the gold, while the other hand rested on the butt of his own gun. Presently he closed his eyes, as though wearily seeking the slumber that had been so long denied him.

BUT Pop Bennett had no thought of sleep. His thoughts were a turmoil concerning the situation, which was incredible to him. In his code, men did not murder their partners, or rob them. Yet Darrah had no compunctions about it; moreover, unless Darrah was lying, Trapp had planned to do as much. And all for the meager quantity of gold they had so painstakingly gleaned from the creeks.

And if Darrah had killed Trapp, it was probable that he, Bennett, would not leave these hills alive. Darrah had practically promised as much. Old Pop wondered why, if the redheaded man planned to kill him, it was necessary to wait until daylight. And then it occurred to the old prospector that the answer was, companionship. Darrah was not primarily a hillman, and he had a childish fear of being bitten a third time by a hydrophobia afflicted skunk; it was probable, too, that he did not care to be alone with his thoughts in this manner, with the blood of his two partners on his soul. Tomorrow, in daylight, it would be different, but not here, tonight. And Darrah would not leave until dawn.

Old Pop twisted his hands and feet, and it seemed that the pack-lashing with which he was secured, gave a little. It was perilous work, with Darrah sleeping lightly if at all, yet the old man knew that if he would live, he must manage to escape before daylight. He put more pressure on the lashing, then desisted suddenly as he saw Darrah's eyes open.

The redheaded man sat up, looked around, and listened. Fear of the night, and the possible enemies whose approach it might conceal, ragged him continualy. He put more wood on the fire, and dragged his bed roll over closer to Bennett's. Apparently he was going to make sure that the old man did not get away. But Pop lay quiet, and presently, Darrah, dog tired, closed his eyes again. Then Bennett went to work again on the lashing.

How long would Darrah sleep this time? Old Pop felt the rope loosen, little by little. In his anxiety to get free, he twisted his arms this way and that; and if Darrah's eyes had opened, they would have discovered instantly what was going on.

But old Pop knew that he must chance it; the thought of waiting there for certain doom at the hands of a murderous maniac, made him desperate. Darrah, in his slumbers, had hitched over on his bed roll until he was no more than a few inches from where old Pop lay. Suddenly, the lashing gave way, and Pop gathered himself. If he could get hold of Darrah's gun, lying so loosely in the man's fingers——

Nevertheless, as quickly as that hope came, it died, for Darrah awoke. Sleep numbed his brain, although his nerves kept his subconscious mind stirred. He moved as though to sit up, and Pop gasped inwardly, for Darrah would see that his erstwhile prisoner was free. But instead, Darrah rolled over.

Instantly, then, pandemonium broke loose.

WITH a shrill scream of terror, Darrah leaped to his feet, pawing blindly at his head. Forgotten was his gun and the poke of gold, which had dropped on the bedroll. His yell of fear sent the echoes chasing

through the solemn silences of the night woods.

"I'm *bit!*" he cried. "God, I'm goin' to die like a dog! Third time—and it's allus fatal——"

He broke off in a prolonged wail like a stricken wolf in its death throes, and before the astonished Pop Bennett could comprehend what was going on, plunged away into the night. The old man heard the clink of his boots on the rocks as the fear crazed man dashed down the steep trail that was shrouded in darkness. And then another cry, choked off abruptly.

"Must've gone plumb over the cliff," decided Pop. "Crazier than a coot, both of 'em. My gosh, I kinda feel it comin' on me, too. Must be ketchin', or suthin'. Darned if that storekeeper wasn't right when he told me to watch out for these two fellers. But I'm used to trustin' my pardners. Yet both of 'em would have killed me.

"Uh!"

He remembered now the scene at dusk, as he overheard Darrah's angry voice charging Trapp with having loaded the pack with a heavy rock when the three men had paused at noon. Still in bewilderment at the strange happenings of the night, he picked up the discarded rock, and hefted it, out of curiosity.

"First one galoot is crazy enough to play that kind of a trick on his pardner, and then the other goes crazy thinkin' he's been bit by a hydrophoby skunk and——"

But he paused, as his practiced eye caught sight of something on one face of the rock, which was curiously veined. He stirred the fire, bent over the rock more closely; then knocked a chip off one corner, and examined that, too. Suddenly he looked up in awe.

"Trapp found this quartz down where he stopped at noon," he soliloquized. "It come off that cliff, there. Gonzales's lost mine, sure as shootin'!" He put his hand on the ground, as he moved to rise suddenly.

It touched a small, loose object. The forgotten mousetrap, which he had set to catch a prowling pack rat. It had been sprung!

"*That* was the hydrophoby skunk which bit Darrah!" he exclaimed. He settled down again, the simple processes of his mind wrestling with what were amazing facts. "I told that storekeeper I'd ketch some varmint with that trap," he reminded himself. "And it nailed Darrah!"

Old Pop regarded the quartz in his hand once more. His enemies had destroyed themselves, while he had part and parcel of a fabulously rich lost mine, which he would proceed to stake out for himself on the morrow. And then happened the miracle which men said had never happened. Pop Bennett smiled!

FORT HALL

THIRTEEN hundred miles from Independence, Missouri, on the west side of the Continental Divide and on the north side of Snake River, a few miles above the mouth of Portneuf Creek, Nathaniel J. Wyeth in 1834 built Fort Hall, which he sold to the Hudson's Bay Company two years later. It was after the style of Old Fort Laramie, except that its walls were built of adobe bricks. They were of a whitish color, were ten feet high and had a bastion at each corner. From this post the Hudson's Bay Company dominated the vast Oregon Territory until the close of the fur days. It looked like a barracks, was eighty feet square and had a regular garrison of six men. Its chief bid for fame was the great part it played during the Oregon Trail days, where caravans found it to be of the utmost value in the matter of aid and supplies. This was a great fur post, a great overland station and in later years was an important military post. There is a suggestion that its original site was abandoned, for in 1844 Fremont found it considerably farther above the mouth of Portneuf Creek, and in later years this latter site was abandoned when the United States Government, in 1870, built the new Fort Hall up on a creek emptying into Blackfoot River, forty miles or more northeast of the original site. In the earlier years the California Trail did not branch off from the Oregon Trail until after it had passed Fort Hall, and reached the point where Raft River enters the Snake; and in later years the California Trail left the main trail either at Fort Bridger, or at the northern end of the Wahsatch Mountains, and thus did not touch at Fort Hall.—*C. E. Mulford*

Monte Takes the Rest Cure

by E. C. LINCOLN

When he came to the end of his perfect day, he found three teeth were loose; one eye had swelled—'twas blue and gray, and a knee hurt like the deuce.

"TALLY!" yelled Monte, straightening up and swinging the "eight" iron about his head in an exultant circle. "That's the last of 'em, Dan."

The whiteface calf, adorned with a clean new Bar Eight on its left ribs, struggled to its feet, kicked twice at the particular cow gentleman who had been forcibly restraining its activities, and hightailed off in search of its mother. Monte's helper unkinked his joints carefully, brushed his dungarees, spit, grinned and looked about him. Shorty and Stew slid from their horses, wiping sweat streaked, sunburned faces as they drew long breaths of relief. Wally Barnes kicked the glowing embers of the fire apart and stood the branding irons upright against the corral fence. Chet Parsons threw open the gate, allowing the nervous, bawling bunch of cows and calves to burst their way out to grass.

The gray cloud which all day long had hung so low that a man could see only dimly, as through a fog, slowly lifted and parched throats drank in the clean air. For two days the corral had been a tumultuous, boiling area of activity; of bellowing cattle, and men shouting through an acrid smell of burned hair, of straining leather, dust, thirst and confusion. Now spring calf branding was over. Seven weary cowpunchers were mighty glad of it.

"Tally!" yelled Monte again. "How many was they, Dan? Seemed like more'n a million o' them little divvils."

Dan Parsons, the young and prosperous owner of the Bar Eight, finished counting the handful of ear tips in his pocket, and began figuring with a stubby pencil on the smooth surface of a two-by-eight. He scratched his head, incredulous. He figured it all through again. The group that had gathered mopped their steaming faces as they waited anxiously for his report.

When he finally turned to them he was grinning broadly. "Boys," he announced, "there's six hundred and fifty whiteface calves wearin' a new Bar Eight monogram, an' if that ain't a record for a two-day brandin' I'll eat my shirt!"

With whoops of delight the recipients of his information turned on one another. They pounded backs, they shook hands, they punched chests; they shouted their mutual congratulations till the saddle ponies tied to the corral fence settled back on their reins in mock terror, and the boss raised his hand for silence.

"Fellers," he said, "I sorter think a gang that's worked the way you guys have deserves a day off. We'll jest leave them cattle in the home pasture for tomorrow. I see by the paper there's a circus in town. We'll start right after breakfast, an' we'll all go to the circus —on me!"

The proposition was carried vociferously.

But as they mounted for the short ride to the harness shed the outfit's top hand, Monte Hanson, edged up to his boss and signaled his desire for speech in private. Monte was forty; he was lean and hard as old rawhide; his countenance, beaten by range blizzard and

burned by range sunshine, was rough and angular as the country itself. He knew cattle, and he knew horses, and he knew Montana—nearly all there was to know about them. Therefore his boss listened with respect when Monte made talk.

"Dan, it's right nice of yuh, an' all that, but—it's all right fer the young fellers—but I'd ruther stay home. I don't feel like I wanted to go to no circus; honest I don't."

The younger man turned to him in surprise. "For gosh sake, Monte, what's eatin' you? 'Twon't be half the fun without you come along. Why don't you want to?"

"Well, fer one thing," said Monte, cocking an eye at the low bank of dark clouds along the western horizon, "it's goin' to rain."

"Mebbe tonight; clear by tomorrow, though. Come on, Monte, don't you want to see the pretty lady jump through the hoop?"

Monte shook his head decidedly. "Nope," he declared, "I don't want to see no more pretty ladies, *never;* not even jumpin' through hoops!"

The boss chuckled. He had heard rumors of an unfortunate matrimonial adventure somewhere back in Monte's dim past. "Come across clean, Monte," he suggested. "What's the real reason?"

Monte cleared his throat and blushed. "Well," he began, "it's thisaway: I ain't had a real vacation in so long I forgets what the last one looked like. I sorter craves to put in one whole day jest doin' nothin'. I wanter lay in bed till noon, an' I don't wanter have to work none whatsoever, an' I don't wanter have to talk to nobody. An' goin' to a circus gits your feet tired, an'——"

"That's plenty," Dan interrupted. "I reckon a feller can use his vacation the way it suits him. I'll take the cook with us so's you'll have the whole place all to your lonesome. Hop to it, ol'timer, an' here's hopin' you enjoy yourself."

"Thanks!" Monte beamed. "I sure will, Danny."

It did rain that night, hard, with much blue lightning and many crashes of thunder that shook the bunkhouse, rattling its windows till anybody in the world but a tired cowpuncher would surely have lain awake. But when the corpulent cook, Red Batten, shouted his summons at six in the morning—one whole hour later than usual—the sun was shining brightly over the sage brown hills to the east, giving promise of a perfect day to come. So Bar Eight rolled out of its blankets joyously, to array itself in its best town warpaint; all but Monte, whose comatose form remained stretched under the covers in angular content.

"Hey, Shorty!" someone shouted, "you're nearer dressed 'n what I am. Go see will Red give us a bucket o' shavin' water from the rain barrel, will yuh?"

Shorty went with reluctance. That rain barrel, a great hogshead which had been painted red and placed under the eaves at the northeast corner of the ranch-house, was an institution which the cook guarded with his life. In spring it was full to overflowing; in summer it often went dry, and then the Bar Eight had to content itself with water from the ranch well, water so hard that it would take the hair from a coyote's back. When the supply was low it was carefully conserved for the morning java and a few other culinary purposes.

This time, however, Shorty returned in triumph. "Full plumb to the top," he announced. "Red never let out a yip *a*-tall. Gosh, she must 'a' rained last night!"

" 'Member to put the cover back on?" Monte queried from his blankets.

"Sure did. Red'd plumb lift a feller's scalp if he left that bar'll open."

AND so they shaved comfortably, deep under the skin, and departed for breakfast; while Monte stretched, and grunted, and rejoiced in the luxury of staying in bed while all the others were up and about. To be sure, the clatter of dishes made him hungry. He didn't mind that—much. He dozed off again. Then the boss was shaking him by the shoulder.

"We're a-goin' now," he announced. "Don't look for us before sundown. An' say; I turned out all the saddle stuff except Old Blue, so use him if you feel like it."

"Why didn't yuh leave one o' my string?" asked Monte.

"He ain't been workin' lately an' the others have. That makes me think; if them cattle bunch 'round the house jest drive 'em off, will you?"

Monte grinned. "No, Danny, I sure

won't," he announced. "I don't aim to do no work whatever, an' chasin' cows is work."

"Yuh darned ol' loafer!" Dan slapped him affectionately on the shoulder. "Well, have it your own way. An' s'long!"

Monte heard him clatter off to join the bunch.

It was quiet after that, very quiet. For a long time Monte lay on his back, staring at the whitewashed ceiling over which three bored flies zigzagged slowly in endless patterns. The morning sun poured in through the east windows. Monte grew restless.

He became conscious of the silence, and tried whistling a bar of "The Cowboy's Lament" to relieve the tension. Funny how wide awake he felt! He attempted the mind cure. "Ain't it great," said Monte aloud, "jest to be layin' here snoozin'. Nothin' to do, an' nobody to make me do it. I'll tell the cockeyed world it is!"

Two minutes later Monte was pulling on his pants.

He sauntered over to the ranchhouse, examined the kitchen, and helped himself to half of a raisin pie. Then he sauntered back to the bunkhouse and sat down on the step. How quiet it was! Sorter dead, somehow. He gazed down the creek; nothing there but a thin line of willows, grassy flats, and sage grown hills that seemed to roll on endlessly to the far, faint, blue northern ranges. East; more sage hills, drenched in sunshine. Around them a few cattle were slowly picking their way. South; same old sage hills, fading into a distant haze.

Monte rolled four cigarettes, one after another, and smoked them slowly. He watched a flock of magpies fluttering and bickering about the roof. Then he arose, and announced to the largest of the magpies that he reckoned he'd saddle up an' take a little ride down the crick. There was a note of apology in his voice, for he had planned not to fork a horse even once till his perfect vacation was over.

When he entered the stall Old Blue the ancient rawboned roan, sixteen hands high, with a dirty temper and a distinct aversion to every man on the ranch except the boss, who kept him for some queer sentimental reason of his own. Monte pointedly did not want to ride that horse; but his feet bore him steadily toward the stable. At the corral gate he looked at his silver watch. Quarter past eight!

When he entered the stall Old Blue laid back his ears, and almost succeeded in getting a full meal out of Monte's shoulder. Monte swore, and, though he forgave the attempt at mayhem, he was still swearing when he pulled tight the cinch out in the corral five minutes later. It seemed a shame to be riding such an ornery rack of bones, coyote bait. He was glad none of the boys could see him. He swung into the saddle and picked up the reins. Old Blue stood with head hanging.

"C'm on, Gran'pa," suggested Monte, closing in with his heels, "I gotter be goin'."

And Monte went. When Old Blue broke in the middle Monte left the saddle by a good eight inches. As he came down he met eleven hundred pounds of horse coming up. At the third jump he left permanently, in a long, high parabola that ended with a crash against the corral fence. When the bright purple pinwheels had ceased spinning in his head Monte rolled up to a sitting posture, dug the dust of the corral from his eyes, and wondered vaguely if he were dead. He tried each arm and leg separately, drew a long breath, and decided that a dead man wouldn't feel so blame many sore places, not all at once. This was one heck of a way to treat a man on his vacation!

He struggled to his feet, rubbing the worst of the sore spots. Old Blue, still giving a creditable imitation of a real bronc, was bawling in wide circles about the corral. When he finally stopped, exhausted and trembling, Monte strolled over painfully. There was fire in his eye as he stripped off the saddle, removed the blanket, and ran his hand carefully over its inner surface. He found what he expected, a sand burr.

"Doggone!" Monte growled, as he slapped the hull on again and set his knee against the cinch ring for better purchase, "them kids think they're smart! Might 'a' broke a feller's neck. Yuh durned ol' sinner, yuh'd never of dumped me if I'd been expectin' anythin', an' you knows it. Yuh start anythin' this time an' I'll cave in that thick skull o' yourn with a neck yoke! This here's a pleasure trip, see?"

As they ambled out through the gate

the morning was hot. When they returned it was hotter yet. Monte limped as he left the corral, and his countenance had lost its look of peace.

Once more Monte sat on the step of the bunkhouse and rolled a cigarette. He was hot, sore, lame and weary. He nursed an increasing suspicion that his vacation so far wasn't quite the glorious day he had planned. Besides, he was growing hungry, though it was barely half past ten. The more he thought about it the surer he became that inside a couple of hours at most he would welcome an honest to goodness cooked dinner. But Monte hated to cook, and he hated even worse to wash dishes. How in thunder could a deserving cowpuncher on his private vacation accumulate a real meal without working for it?

MONTE'S mind began riding circles; first a mile from home, then two, then three. At four miles the path of his imagination crossed that benchland claim where Joe Swartz's widow still made an attempt at dry farming. There his imagination paused hopefully. It was risky, of course. When a man gets past forty he can't be too careful—of widows especially. Still, by starting promptly he ought to be able to arrive just at the polite moment for dinner. Monte resolved to chance it.

He hastened into the bunkhouse, shaved, dug his best town pants out of his war chest, and tied a blue handkerchief about his neck. His glance at the wavy mirror cheered him up. With good luck the day might be saved. A good dinner, then a nap through the hot afternoon. Yessir, that'd beat any circus ever came over the river!

So thought Monte as he stumped painfully down to the corral again, resaddled Old Blue, and hit the four mile trail up the rimrock and across the level bench.

It was eleven-thirty when he jogged in among the scattered shacks which constituted Mis' Swartz's ranch. He passed the chicken yard and rounded the corner of the one room frame cabin. On the ramshackle porch a long, lean man sat rocking, a man Monte's own age, Sim Humphrey of Wolf Creek. Monte knew him; and all the love he bore Sim could be tucked in a gopher's eye without making him wink.

Monte nodded a surly acknowledgment of Sim's triumphant grin. Gladly, very gladly, would he have retired then and there—if only the sound of Old Blue's hoofs hadn't reached Mis' Swartz's ears, bringing that worthy lady to the doorway, which she filled to overflowing as she waved an iron spoon in greeting.

"Why, if here ain't Monte, too! Git right down off your horse, Mr. Hanson, an' sit here in the shade. You sure do look hot, an'——"

"I wasn't plannin' to stop none, Mis' Swartz. I was jest ridin' by like, an' I sorter thought——" But all the time Monte was climbing down from Old Blue. The widow's plump, moist hand shook his hard fist vigorously.

"Now don't you say nothin', Mr. Hanson. Here I ain't had company for three weeks, an' this mornin' Sim drops in—'tain't a half hour since you come, is it, Sim?—an' now here's you. An' me an' Sim caught a couple o' fries, an' they're pretty near done right now. Smell 'em?"

Too late Monte remembered that Mis' Swartz was a talker.

"Well, I dunno——"

"That's fine! Now you two boys jest entertain each other till dinner's ready, an' after that we'll have a good long talk. I got to go look at that mess o' chicken."

After the departure of his hostess Monte reclined against the strongest post of the porch, and waited. Sim rocked slowly, provocatively, and waited. Ten minutes passed in pointed silence, then Sim, "Mis' Swartz is sure one fine lady, ain't she? Reckon she must of come from Iowa. You from Iowa, Monte?"

"Nebraska." Monte snorted the word.

"Now that's too bad. Iowa's a great state. Know where all the pretty girls come from, Monte?"

"Nebraska."

"Iowa," corrected Sim. "Pretty girls an' he-men. Look at them wrastlers. Who's Nebraska got to match Frank Gotch, huh?"

"Me," said Monte, standing up and shucking his coat. Gone were those aches in shoulder and knee where he had been thrown against the corral fence, chased away by that wave of anger that surged over him at these slurs cast on the fair fame of his native

State. "An' I'm here to prove it on any Iowa guy what thinks different!"

Sim, too, arose and cleared for action. He joined Monte in the little space of shade before the porch. Without a word they crouched, circled, and came together in a rush like two herd bulls.

For a moment it was nip and tuck, a haze of straining shoulders and flying feet; then as Sim reached for a head lock his bony fist came squarely in contact with Monte's left eye. Monte tore loose, sprang backward, and came in fighting. No wrestling this time; toe to toe and slug—from the love of one's native State, and pure cussedness. Science was for weaklings. They landed hard and often. Monte caught a right swing on his damaged optic. His own knuckles landed with a soul satisfying jar on Sim's nose.

And then, before they were even well started, a feminine voice came shrill on the dusty air, "Boys! Boys! What*ever* are you two doin'!"

Monte ducked, and clasped his opponent in a mighty hug. "Pertend we's jest wrastlin'," he hissed in Sim's ear. Aloud, "We was jest playin', Mis' Swartz—jest wrestlin' while we was waitin' fer dinner. Warn't we, Sim?"

Sim played up like a gentleman. "Sure, Mis' Swartz," he echoed, "we was jest playin' like. Yuh see——"

"Oh!" said the widow Swartz, with the slightest shade of disappointment in her fat little voice, "oh—I thought mebbe—well, if that ain't jest like boys, always scufflin' or somethin'. Joe Swartz was that way till he died. I uster tell him, 'Joe, you ain't nothin' but a big kid. Seems like you won't never grow up,' I says.

"My, your nose is bleedin', Sim! An' look at Monte's eye! You boys sure play awful rough, don't you? Now wash up an' come to dinner."

Together the two culprits retreated to the horse trough, where they sloshed and gurgled comfortably. Sim began to chuckle. "Say, Monte," he commented, "you sure think quick, you do. Know what was in Mis' Swartz's mind, don't yuh?"

"Yeh?"

"She thought we was fightin' over her."

"Gosh-a-mighty!" breathed Monte, a sudden terror clutching at his heart. "I never thought o' that. I was mostly thinkin' what a heck of a way to spend a vacation."

"Meanin'?" asked Sim doubtfully.

"Meanin' nothin'. C'mon; let's go eat."

IT WAS good, that dinner. Monte should have appreciated the golden tenderness of fried chicken rolled in flour, and the crisp, sweet, raised biscuits. But he didn't. He discovered that three teeth on one side were loose, painful to bite on. His eye was swelling, too, closing steadily. The ache in his shoulder and knee had returned. He felt very weary. And Mis' Swartz talked all the time.

Then it was over at last, and in spite of all his troubles Monte felt better, forgetting that it is always brightest just before the clouds close in again.

"Now, you boys jest help me with these dishes, an' then we'll take the chairs out on the porch an' have a nice long talk," suggested Mis' Swartz.

That was the final straw. Monte rose in his dignity. He didn't care what anybody thought about him, either. "I sure am sorry, ma'am," he protested, "but I jest can't stop no longer this afternoon. Yuh see, the boss an' all the boys is away, an' Dan, he left lots of things he wanted I should do."

He seized his hostess' hand and pumped it.

"An' I sure hopes you two has a good time," he shot back as he slid through the doorway, almost running. A moment later he was astride Old Blue, headed for home.

Slowly he regained his equanimity. The sun was warm on his back. The closed and puffy eye was an inconvenience, but not really painful. Knee and shoulder ached much less when he was riding.

About him lay mile on mile of sage grown hills, the coulees deep in June grass. Overhead a curlew called. Plenty of room here for everybody, even for Mis' Swartz and Sim. But as a vacation the day hadn't been much of a success; in fact he didn't know when he had felt so tired and sleepy. Still, it was only midafternoon. Nothing more could happen before he was home again; then he'd bunk down on the old blankets, nice and cool, and sleep till the boys got back. A vacation was sure a grand thing, if you made the most of it.

Suddenly Old Blue shied, breaking in upon Monte's pleasant dreams. A lean gray coyote leaped from a bunch of greasewood beside the trail, loped a few yards to the right, and squatted on his haunches. He regarded Monte quizzically.

Monte kicked Old Blue in the ribs, reining him back to the path. "Yuh durned ol' flea pasture—" He was addressing the coyote—"yuh pretty near got me spilled, that time. Take this!" Filling his lungs to the limit he emitted a yell that made Old Blue snort and shiver apprehensively.

The coyote never flinched. He cocked his head to one side, opened his mouth, and showed Monte his pink tongue, grinning.

"Doggone it all, he's makin' faces at me!" gasped Monte. "Can't no coyote do that an' live! Wisht I had my gun." Stealthily he freed the buckle which held his coiled rope to the saddle fork. Cautiously he worked out the loop. Then he set spurs to Old Blue.

For two minutes it was as pretty a race as anyone could wish, with the coyote looking over his shoulder as he labored to hold his forty foot lead. Monte's rope swung ready. Old Blue did his panting best. But when they entered the broad mouth of the nearest coulee at the end of those two minutes the same forty feet separated Monte from his quarry. Then, just as he resolved to take a chance anyhow, the coyote went to earth in an old badger hole.

Monte dismounted, swearing. He got down on his good knee and peered into the opening. Though he wasn't certain, it seemed to him that he could see a movement, away down in the darkness. He stood up, painfully, and scratched his head.

"I could dig that feller out, all right, only I'd have to ride clean to the ranch after a pick. No suh, 'tain't worth it. That'd take half an hour, an' the first thing I know I won't git no sleep this afternoon *a*-tall!"

However, as he turned to mount he remembered something which in the heat of the chase had slipped his mind—the State bounty. He paused, irresolute, while his one undamaged eye scanned the hillside for a stone with which to block the mouth of the hole. He found one, and was lost.

"C'mon, hoss," grunted Monte almost in anger, "we gotter go git a pick."

Over the remaining mile to the Bar Eight, Old Blue hustled at top speed. Only once was he allowed to pause for breath; when Monte had to dismount to open the wire gate in the south fence of the home pasture. Monte resented that coyote. He reflected that, as it stood, this holiday of his was pretty nearly a total loss. If he hadn't met that onery little wolf he'd be stretched on his bunk, sound asleep, right then. Just the same, a five dollar bounty was too much to throw away.

At the tool shed Monte got the pick, likewise a ten foot length of stiff wire which he coiled and tied to the saddle. At the bunkhouse he dismounted a second time. Here he pulled his old six-gun from the nail above the head of his bunk and buckled it about his hips. As he buckled—and grunted—he looked down on that comfortable, cool bunk of his, with its gray blankets drawn so tight and neat, and his heart was sore within him.

"Never you mind, ol' feller," he promised, "I'm a-comin' back right soon now, to have a good snooze for the rest o' the day. Darn' it, seems like I can't git no rest, nohow."

BACK in the coulee again, and the badger hole still plugged securely. Monte dropped the reins, leaving Old Blue tied to the ground. The coil of wire he unrolled, straightened, and laid in readiness. Then he swung the pick as vigorously as his lame shoulder would permit.

It was easy digging, there in the side hill. In ten minutes Monte was drenched with perspiration, to be sure, but he had removed the better part of the roof of that badger hole, and in the darkness, four or five feet down, he could certainly see something moving. He took the wire, made a stiff six-inch loop at one end, poked it down the hole, and began angling patiently. Before long his tentative jerks met with resistance. He pulled hard.

"Yessir," gloated Monte, "got 'im by the foreleg, I bet."

He loosened the gun at his thigh, set his heels in the soft earth, and pulled. Slowly the coyote was drawn up. Monte could see the sharp nose, and the two

yellow eyes gleaming in the shadow. One more heave!

But the coyote beat him to it. On that last heave he came out of the hole like a shell from a seventy-five, and the surprise of his coming sent Monte on his back in a wild tangle of wire and coyote and flailing legs. Then, somehow, the tangle seemed to straighten out, and Monte, rolling to his knees, pumped lead at the flying gray streak that was vanishing up the coulee till the gun clicked and went dead in his hand. Goodby bounty!

He was too angry to swear. In grim silence he rammed the empty gun back into its holster, took up the pick, and turned to mount Old Blue.

But Old Blue wasn't there—nor anywhere else, so far as Monte could see.

"The ol' son of a gun beat it!" lamented the afflicted one. "Gosh!"

He looked for tracks, which he found and followed to the top of the nearest ridge. There they disappeared. Somewhere in the great rolling range land that stretched away to the south, Old Blue was enjoying himself; where, Monte hadn't the slightest idea.

"I sure hope the ol' buzzard appreciates his vacation—like I'm doin'," he murmured. "Mebbe he'll circle home, an' I'll git my saddle back. If he don't, I'm prayin' the wolves git him quick." He threw down the pick, kicked it, spit on his hands, hitched his best pants, now smeared with earth, and started once more for home, for that cool bunk with gray blankets which called to him out of the distance.

As he plodded painfully on through the sagebrush Monte's heart was bitter within him. One whole hot mile to go! As far back as he could remember he had never walked a whole mile in all his life, not in high heeled boots, anyhow. A swell, a sweet day off!

Monte balanced the account in his mind. Assets; two hours' extra sleep, and one fair to middlin' dinner. Liabilities; one half busted shoulder, ditto knee, three loose and troublesome teeth, one black eye of practically no value for seeing purposes, general feelings of disgust and exhaustion. And lonesome! If only he had one sympathetic listener to whom he might unburden himself life might seem brighter. But—Monte mopped his steaming forehead—even Old Blue had deserted him.

After a long while, a long, sweatful, painful while, Monte limped up to that wire gate which opened into the home pasture, and hung limp across it. Four o'clock. The round, hot sun was already declining into the haze above the Western hills. Before him, hardly three hundred yards away, lay the white ranch buildings, and his own soft bunk with its gray blankets. Yet Monte viewed the intervening landscape with all the aversion which his exhausted being could muster, for in his absence the cattle had drifted over the flat till now, in formidable numbers, whitefaced cows and calves and bulls and steers grazed between Monte and that haven of refuge in the near distance.

Monte knew those cattle were mostly whitefaces, knew the chances were ten to one that a man, even though on foot, might walk among them unmolested; but there was always the off chance of some hysterical old mother cow with a delicate nervous system. Monte moved forward cautiously, avoiding the spot where the herd was thickest. He was half way to his goal when he came to a decided stop.

Between him and the ranch-house, though at right angles to his path, a half dozen Brahma steers were grazing. Now Monte had some confidence in Herefords, but these Brahmas were another proposition entirely. They had been bought two years earlier, a whim of Dan's, to use for steer riding at the local rodeo. Rangy, rough coated beasts with the spreading horns of the old time Texan, their experiences in the arena had helped to sour tempers which had been none too sweet in the beginning, to the point where no cowpuncher on the Bar Eight would knowingly enter a corral on foot if a Brahma were among those present.

Monte swung out a bit further, pretending his hardest to be minding his own business.

He heard a snort from the direction of the Brahmas. From the corner of his eye Monte saw them shifting restlessly as they watched him. Then the whole Brahma clan swung off at a rattling gallop, which if continued would cut Monte's back trail well behind him. Breathing more easily Monte turned his head to make certain they had no evil designs, and even as he turned the leader of the Brahmas wheeled sud-

denly out of the bunch, kinked his tail, and started in Monte's direction!

Monte wasted no time. Forgotten were the aching knee and shoulder, forgotten the blistered feet. He shot from a standing start like a trained sprinter, arms and legs working wildly. Monte, heading for home in a hurry, took on the appearances of a very busy Dover eggbeater. Behind him he heard the click of a hoof on a stone. He let out his last reserve.

On the grass before him a dark shadow began dancing—and the shadow had horns.

Monte reached the nearest corner of the ranch-house, caught it, skidded past. Twenty feet away stood that great red rainbarrel, with the half grown whiteface which had knocked off the cover still scratching comfortably against its bulging side. Pebbles from the rear were flying past Monte's feet. With a yell that sent the whiteface galloping in terror down the coulee Monte gave one last convulsive leap for safety. A geyser of silver water shot high in the late afternoon sunshine.

AT SEVEN o'clock that evening the Bar Eight contingent clattered out from the draw which led from the east bench down to the level of the home place, to swing happily into the last stretch at a high lope. It had been one gorgeous day in town, but this was home. Dan, in the lead, shaded his eyes with his hand.

"What d'you know about that!" he muttered. "I told Monte to keep them cattle away from the buildings, an' jest look there. There's them Brahmas all 'round the porch!"

The Bar Eight crowd drew rein and looked. A hundred yards away the Brahmas, plenty excited, milled about the corner of the ranch-house, about the red water barrel, with evident interest in something. As the Bar Eight watched, the largest of the steers dropped his head and sailed into that red target. They could hear the thud of impact clearly.

Slim, the cook, set spurs to his pony. "Hey!" he yelled. "they'll plumb ruin that cistern in a minute. Drive 'em off!"

Before his charge the Brahmas scattered reluctantly, drifting away without unseemly haste. And then, under the astonished eyes of the Bar Eight, a human head poked itself above the rim of the rainbarrel. It was followed by human shoulders. A leg crooked itself across the rim, and a human figure crawled painfully over the side. Monte Hanson, all that was left of him, stood dripping and shivering before them.

He limped as he moved. One eye, blackened, was swollen shut; the other bore an infinite weariness.

For a moment they watched in wondering silence, then seven crazy cowpunchers rocked in their saddles with shouts of uncontrollable mirth.

Even to Monte, bruised, half frozen, and weary almost unto death, came the saving humor of the range land, the grim, ironic sense of absurdity which pulls the cowboy through burning sun and driving blizzard to the victorious end. His dripping face creased in a forlorn grin.

"D-Dan," he stammered, "thi-this s-s-stuff about a v-vacation's all b-b-bunk. One more d-day like this 'n' an' s-somebody'd be pattin' me in the f-face with a spade. Think up a g-g-good hard job f-fer me tomorrow, Danny; I sure needs a rest!"

The good news you've been waiting for!

Every morning the mail man brought that same request anew; every day we explained to somebody else why we delayed; every night we asked ourselves "Well, why the Sam Hill shouldn't we?"

And now we are—with the first August issue.

WEST is coming WEEKLY!

RATTLESNAKE PETE'S HUNCH

by J. A. Bjerregaard

Author of "The Link of Steel," etc.

It was the hunch of a shrewd old-timer—and an old-timer was sorely needed on the big irrigation project, which faced disaster through ruthless sabotage. But when the hour for action came, it was young Jed Powers who followed that hunch through to a smashing climax.

AS A GOLDEN sun peeped over the eastern range, driving the blue shadows and mists of dawn farther and farther into their rocky retreats, a dinky engine with a string of dumps roared down the grade from the quarry in the canyon above and ground to a halt over the rock bins. Hardly had it stopped when a khaki clad figure swung down from the little cab, half sliding, half running down the steep slope of the embankment to the bench on which the concrete plant stood.

A glorious morning it was, one to quicken the pulse and expand the soul. Judson Powers, construction engineer of the Rio Alto Irrigation Project, halted a moment and surveyed the familiar scene. Below, a titanic mass of concrete rose from the rocky bed of the river, day by day taking form, the ever growing child of his imagination. The air reverberated with the rush and bustle of the construction job, the roar of concrete in the chutes, the snorting and clatter of shovels and cranes. All this had become part of his very life, a dream in the course of fulfilment. Then to the south where the canyon walls fell away, the gradually widening valley lay softly subdued under the rays of the early sun. Even on such occasions, had that vast expanse of harsh sagebrush and cactus softened to a vision of fertile farms and gardens; of homes and villages; of the desert touched by the magic wand of water, blossoming forth.

Yet somehow this morning the vision failed to appear. The endless stretches of sand, already shimmering under the promise of a furnace-like heat to come, lay barren and forbidding. For, during the past few weeks a series of unaccountable mishaps had played havoc with the work and now—well, now he was faced by a most unpleasant duty. His brother, who as manager of the project was just as deeply interested in its success as he, must be informed of the latest and well nigh fatal catastrophe that had befallen them. So his heart was filled with bitterness as he made his way down to the little construction office.

Bill Powers, engrossed in a mass of calculations, hardly noticed his brother's entrance as the latter slumped wearily into a chair. Something of the ominous silence that followed, the absence of the younger man's usual joyous whistle as he tackled his daily task, caused Bill to look up inquiringly.

"What's the trouble, Jud?" he asked.

Jud filled and lighted his pipe with deliberation. "Quarry plant's wrecked,"

he said at last, striving to keep his voice even. "Big slide from up on Flat Top Mountain. No accident either."

For a moment Bill sat silent, stunned. His face, already showing the effects of the tension under which he had been working, seemed suddenly to grow gray and old.

"What had the watchman to say?" he asked.

Jud shook his head sadly. "Poor old Mike got caught under a ten ton boulder. He may tell what he knows at Judgment, but not now."

Bill bit savagely at the end of a cigar as he paced up and down the little office.

"Last week a string of cars gets loose on the grade and scatters itself over the landscape," he said bitterly. "Then the floating derrick sinks mysteriously in the middle of the night. Now the quarry plant is reduced to junk. What next?" He paused staring out the window. "And none of those things just happened. There's a devilish clever mind behind it all. This time, though, it's murder! Did you pick up any clues?"

"Only this," and Jud tossed a small metallic object on the desk. "This" proved to be a spur rowel of peculiar design. "Found it on the ledge above where the slide let go. Now all we have to do is find somebody with a broken spur and prove he did it. Try and do it."

"Well, we'll notify the sheriff anyway, even if he did laugh in my face when I reported the other affairs. I wonder——"

The door burst open with a bang and both men started, only to relax as a grinning, freckled face surmounted by a shock of flaming red hair, thrust itself into the opening. A long arm tossed a package of mail on the table, waved an informal salute and the door closed with another bang. Picking the letters up, Bill sorted them over idly. He selected two; one with a New York postmark and a Wall Street return address; the other with a local postmark. He tore open the latter and as he read he smiled grimly, then passed the letter to Jud.

"That cat shows its claws," Bill remarked.

Scrawled in pencil, the note read as follows:

Bill Powers:-

Maybe by the time you read this you'll have had enough. If you have, take five thousand bucks, cash to El Capitan tonight at eleven. Leave it under the big rock at the bend in the trail and go your way. Don't bring anyone with you and don't try any tricks. You can't get away with it. If you haven't had enough, just try and guess what's going to happen next.

Yours for prosperity,
A Cattleman

The brothers looked at each other speculatively.

"He's right," Jud said slowly shaking his head, "I know that place he mentions. It's on the trail to the Circle Z and you can see for miles around. You couldn't possibly trap anyone there.

"On the other hand, I take it, you're not goin' to hand out five thousand dollars either. All we can do is to notify the sheriff and establish a regular military guard. The sheriff's owned by the ranchers, I know, and would be tickled to death to see us on the rocks, but I don't believe he can stand for murder."

Bill picked up the letter and the rowel, placing them carefully in the little safe.

"Exhibits A and B," he said as he spun the dial. "Now let's see what our New York friends have to say, though I think I can make a pretty fair guess at that."

The letter read as follows:

Mr. William Powers,
Morelos, N. M.
Dear Sir:

Your report of the 21st received. We note another mishap on the Rio Alto job. We cannot but consider the constant recurrence of these affairs as unusual, to say the least. The cost and the delay involved are rapidly becoming serious.

There should be no misunderstanding. Your job is to get the work completed within the time and cost limits of the estimate. Excuses will not irrigate the Rio Alto Valley. We therefore look to you for immediate results.

Another point—when you undertook this work you agreed to line up the cattlemen to our scheme. Our agent was out there last week. His attempt to discuss the matter with a Mr. Jake Shel-

ton, head of the local Cattlemen's Association, ended very unpleasantly. Such a state of affairs is intolerable, Mr. Powers, as the success of our venture is in a large degree dependent on the cooperation of the cattlemen. If you are unable to put this thing over, kindly let us know so that we may make the necessary arrangements.

Very truly yours,
J. Atwood Morse

The reading of the letter was followed by a prolonged silence. Jud relighted his pipe and walked slowly over to the window, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. His strong, deeply tanned features were not exactly handsome, but they seemed to radiate a determination to win that had ever inspired a wholesome respect in the hard-bitten crew whose efforts he directed. He knocked out his pipe, refilled it, and jammed it back in his mouth. The future looked anything but bright. An unkind fate seemed to be dragging them step by step, relentlessly toward disaster. Yet as he thought of the reference in the last letter to the fate of the banker's agent at the hands of the rancher, he smiled. For well he could picture old fire eating Jake Shelton of the Circle Z when this dude broached the subject of an agreement of any kind with the despised Farmer's Association. Only too well he knew how bitterly the ranchers resented this intrusion on their range. That they might benefit by a mutual understanding, they had never been willing to admit, though they were at present forced to drive their cattle over into Texas or ship them to other places for fattening. They were raising cattle, they were making money, and they would brook no interference.

At his desk, Bill sat staring absently at the litter of papers. He bore considerable resemblance to his younger brother, though his eyes were more dreamy and his hair was graying at the temples.

"I don't suppose we can blame Morse for gettin' hot, at that," Bill spoke at last. "Sittin' in a swivel chair, behind a mahogany desk, with a six inch Havana in his face, and a blushin' stenog takin' the letter, it must be pretty hard to realize what we're up against here. And things *have* come to a pretty serious pass. We're two weeks behind schedule now. Another serious delay and we're sunk."

"Say, I'll bet the old duke will tear his hair when he gets the report on the quarry," Jud smiled grimly as he returned to his chair. "If his stenog never blushed before, I'll gamble she'll get a chance to demonstrate now. Well, I'll go and check up the damage. The gang ought to have things cleared up a bit now. Then we can wire for parts."

He got up and started for the door.

"By the way, Jud, are you going over to the Circle Z tonight?" Bill inquired as he followed his brother out.

Jud flushed. "I was thinking of it," he said.

"That's all right, boy," Bill laughed and slapped the younger man on the shoulder, "Laura Shelton is a fine girl. If I were a bit younger, I might give you a little opposition myself. But what I was thinking was this. Old man Shelton might listen to you when he wouldn't to anyone else. Not much use my trying because whenever I go near him he looks at me as though he thought I had the plague. You might get him thinking about it anyway. Don't rile the old boy, whatever you do. It wouldn't be healthy. Just ease the idea over if you get a chance."

"It's a ticklish business Bill," Jud mused, rubbing his stubble covered chin. "It's loaded with dynamite; but I'll do what I can."

THE sun had dropped behind Flat Top Mountain leaving a halo of glory above the gathering shadows, and the eastern range stood forth clothed, for a moment, in royal robes of purple and scarlet, when Jud Powers dismounted in front of the Circle Z ranch-house. On the steps of the vine covered porch sat a golden haired girl. She was dressed in simple white and on her lap was a guitar from which a dreamy song of old Mexico floated out on the cool evening breeze. Back in the shadows of the porch sat old Jake Shelton, comfortably stretched out in a big easy chair. Beneath his shaggy brows his keen old eyes gazed through a cloud of acrid blue smoke from his pipe. On the steps beside the girl sat a man whom Jud recognized as the foreman of the Circle Z, Carerra by name. A handsome chap he was, in a dark sinister way, and well built withal. As Jud came up the

walk, the girl arose and met him with outstretched hand.

"Well, Jud Powers! I was beginning to think you had forgotten us. Why, I haven't seen you in an age."

"Not because I didn't want to come," Jud smiled.

The foreman got up, stretched, and muttering something about looking after the horses, he stalked down the path, favoring Jud with an evil leer as he passed. Then, by chance, Jud happened to look at the man's feet. He stared, fascinated. On the usual high heeled shoes, the foreman was wearing a pair of heavy Mexican spurs, curiously wrought. And the rowel of the left spur was missing!

A call from the girl brought him back from a contemplation of this new phase of the matter. Somehow he wished he hadn't seen that broken spur; not now, anyway. He turned to Jake.

"Good evening, Mr. Shelton. This is sure a pleasant spot to come after a spell in our diggings."

Jake growled some response and continued puffing at his pipe. A fine specimen of a man was this grizzled veteran of the range. A giant in strength and action in his day, he was still a match for many far younger men. And somehow, under his gruff exterior, he liked this young engineer, but hating everything he stood for, the old cattleman could not bring himself to admit the liking.

For a time Jud tried valiantly to strike up a conversation while the girl listened intently. He discussed current politics and their effect on business in general and on the cattle market in particular. Yet few expressions of opinion could he draw from the old man. What statements he did make were short and to the point, admitting no argument. Gradually, cautiously, Jud worked around to the subject he had in mind, but Jake seemed to read his thoughts.

"Say, look here, young feller!" he thundered at last in a way that made Jud jump. "If you are tryin' to rope me into an argument about that fool business of yore's, yo're goin' to be greatly surprised! I druv' one dude off'n *the* place this week for that!" He arose to his towering height and looked down at Jud menacingly. The girl sprang to her feet.

"Father! Don't get excited," she said softly, laying her hand on his arm. "It wouldn't do any harm to talk things over would it?"

"This is no business for a woman to mix in," he said, looking down at her severely, but as he looked the hard lines of his face relaxed and his eyes grew soft and almost dreamy. He stroked the golden hair with his heavy sun blackened hand, then turned and went into the house. The girl returned to her seat on the steps.

"It's strange how hard Dad takes these things," she mused. "Progress must come and if this is real progress, no one can hope to check it."

"I reckon it's a good subject to keep away from just now, though," Jud smiled. "Your dad sure put the fear of the Lord into that agent the syndicate sent out here. We heard from New York about it today."

It was late when Jud finally mounted his horse and rode away into the starlit night. An almost imperceptible breeze sighed softly through the sagebrush, wafting to his ears, ever more faintly, the sad strain, *"Farewell to thee!"*

THE sun was well over toward the meridian on the second day following, when Jud, standing at the open door of the construction office, saw a rider picking his way cautiously down the steep mountain trail. Behind him nodded a burro, almost hidden by a pack of a size out of all proportion to the tiny animal beneath. The rider himself was a rather dilapidated individual. His faded blue overalls and shirt showed many more or less successful attempts at patching; his toes peeped here and there through his cracked shoes, and a tuft of wiry gray hair bristled through a gap in his battered old hat. The band of the hat was a huge rattlesnake skin. He dismounted in front of the office and came in with a hearty, "Howdy, Jud!"

"How's Rattlesnake Pete?" Jud grinned as he grasped the lean callused hand.

Pete tapped a small sack he was carrying and winked. "I've struck it!" he whispered.

He emptied the sack on the table. A few chunks of white rock rolled out. Only a casual inspection was necessary to see that the quartz was shot through with minute specks of gleaming metal.

"She's the Mother Lode, boy!" Pete prenounced the magic formula in an awestruck voice. "I always know'd I'd strike her if I kept on lookin' long enough. Seemed for a bit, though, that I might not last that long." He gazed long and lovingly at the specimens that meant to him the culmination of a lifetime of bitter toil and hardship. "Where's Bill?" he asked looking up at last.

"He went in with the boys after the payroll early this morning. He should have been back before this. I'm getting anxious."

"Sho', Bill can take care of himself," Pete answered easily. "Boy, that grubstake you loaned me last winter shore saved my ornery good for nothin' life. But now we're all made."

He spat reflectively and rolled a huge quid to the other side of his stubble covered face. "I'm goin' in to town an' file my claim, also get her assayed. An' don't forget we're pardners, now. Rattlesnake Pete may be a danged old reprobate, but he don't forget his friends."

A wheezing flivver rattled up the river trail, coughed and stopped. Jud sprang to his feet smiling, but the smile froze as he saw the single occupant of the car climb stiffly out. A dark faced, heavy set man he was, with a wide black hat and two guns hung low. On his vest gleamed a silver star.

"Jud Powers, I have a warrant for yore arrest. Complicity in highway robbery and murder. Anythin' you say may be used against you." The sheriff spoke sternly as he stepped into the office and held out a formidable looking document. "Where's yore brother?"

Jud took the paper in a dazed manner. What new fling of fortune was this?

"I say, where's yore brother?" the sheriff repeated impatiently.

Jud started. "Why, Bill went to town with the boys after the payroll this morning."

"Sure he went after the payroll," the sheriff laughed harshly, "and I reckon he got it too. Anyway, the payroll's gone to points unknown, an' so is yore brother. Also yore paymaster and timekeeper are plumb dead. Neat stickup job it was too. Timed to the minute. Calcalate to have 'em all in the cooler by night, though. Ain't no grass growin' under the feet of justice in this yere county."

"Jackson and Meeker—*dead?*" Jud said slowly as the full meaning of the tragedy came upon him. He looked at the sheriff incredulously. "The payroll robbed, and Bill disappeared. And you're arresting me as having something to do with it?"

"Uh-huh! Look an' see for yoreself," the sheriff waved a hand toward the warrant.

Stunted, overwhelmed by this final blow of a mocking fate, Jud sank limply into a chair. He had the sensation of a bather who, suddenly stepping into a deep hole, and being seized with a cramp, plunges helplessly down, down, down into the black void.

The sheriff looked impatiently at his watch. "Well, come on, let's git movin'!" he growled.

"Will you let me give our superintendent a few instructions?" Jud asked wearily, passing a hand over his eyes.

The officer looked narrowly at his prisoner. "Yeh, I suppose so," he assented grudgingly. "But don't try any funny business." He laid his hand significantly on the butt of one of his guns. Then as an afterthought, "Just to be sure, guess I'll snap the bracelets on ye."

While a passing laborer carried the message to the superintendent, Jud looked around for Pete, but the old man was gone. So were the rocks that had been on the table.

Scared the old coot out," Jud smiled bitterly.

Fifteen minutes later the mystified super watched his young chief enter the car with the sheriff and stood staring till the car vanished in the inevitable cloud of dust.

IN THE flivver grim silence prevailed. The scorching sun; the alkali dust; the rough trail; none tended to sooth the temper or loosen the tongue. The trail followed the river bank and for the most part wound between high thickets of mesquite and tornilla. Then suddenly as they rounded an especially sharp turn, something snapped up across the trail and the flivver brought up with a violent jerk. Before the sheriff could recover from the shock of impact with the steering wheel a rider emerged from the brush. A red bandana handkerchief covered his face to the eyes, while his shapeless hat

was pulled down over his forehead. Through a rent in the hat a tuft of gray hair sprouted. But the thing that fascinated the sheriff and caused him to raise his hands obediently over his head was the unwavering muzzle of a huge revolver.

"Both of ye git out!" the rider ordered gruffly and was promptly obeyed.

He reached down and relieved the sheriff of both his guns.

"Now give me the belt and yore keys," he commanded.

Dismounting, he unlocked the handcuffs from the mystified Jud, then turned to the sheriff.

"Git in thar and back that contraption off'n the road. Thar, that'll do. Now set down on the shady side against that wheel, so."

He proceeded to snap the cuffs on the sheriff's wrists, putting the link through the spokes of the wheel.

"Thar! I reckon you'll be plumb comfortable till somebody finds ye." The masked man stepped back and surveyed his work.

"You'll pay for this," the discomfited sheriff sputtered, finding his voice at last. "Interferin' with an officer of the law in the performance of his duty is a serious offense."

"Don't you all worry about me none, hombre. I'll take good care of myself." The man laughed as he examined the sheriff's guns. Selecting one, he put it in its holster, hung the belt over his saddle horn, and tossed the other gun on the seat of the car.

"One gun's enough for any man," he remarked. "Well, I reckon I'd better stop that fog horn of yores before I go."

The sheriff's own handkerchief and a piece of cord from the flivver made an effective gag.

"Now, feller," the masked man ordered Jud, "you march right ahead along the trail, an' no tricks or I'll drill ye."

Out of sight and hearing, Rattlesnake Pete pulled the mask from his face. His yellow teeth showed in a wide grin.

"This is pretty serious business, Pete," Jud remonstrated. "Takin' a prisoner from a sheriff calls for quite a spell in the cooler."

"That's right son, and maybe even a rope party in this case. But I've got a hunch! If that hunch is right, the sheriff 'll owe me a vote of thanks. If it's wrong, well, Rattlesnake Pete can make himself scarce in these parts, that's all. It wasn't your fault. I druv' you off at the p'int of a gun. I did set a heap store by that prospect o' mine." He looked wistfully up at the barren hills. "Aimed to retire when I sold it an' buy me a nice little ranch. But hell, I reckon there's plenty more gold in the world!

"Howsomever, this ain't goin' to be any Sunday school picnic. Bein' outside the law ourselves now, we can't expect much help less'n we find pay dirt. If my hunch is correct, we ought to find yore brother and git the goods on the bandits. Now if you don't want to set in on this little game, just go on back to yore friend the sheriff and let him lock you up in the Morelos jug."

"All right, Pete, deal me a hand," Jud grinned, "I'll play your hunch with you. Things can't get much worse than they are right now but while there is life there is hope."

"That's the stuff!" Pete laughed happily. "You'll find yore cayuse tied up over there behind that next bunch of mesquite. Maybe old Rattlesnake Pete didn't have to hump some to rustle that animile an' git here ahead of that danged flivver. Here, hang this cannon on yore middle, it may come in handy."

FINDING the scene of the holdup was no difficulty. A battered and bullet riddled flivver marked the spot. Neither was the picking up of the bandit's trail work for an expert tracker. The soft soil held deep hoofprints, many of them, and they led directly to the river.

"Now here's where my hunch begins," Pete leaned on his saddle horn and gazed out over the river. "Hombres that run foul of the law in these parts most always head into them hills," he indicated the broken country across the river to the west. "Probably a couple of posses over there now wearin' out horseshoes on the rocks. But I'll bet my claim an' outfit they never crossed the river.

"Here's what they done. They went into the river bed here, just to lose the trail, folleyed that gravel bar down to the narrows and climbed out on that shingle slope. That doesn't leave much of a trail. Back this way they came, ridin' in the shingle, to that little canyon you see right above here. From that canyon,

if you know the way, there's a trail that leads over an easy pass and down the other side where there's a big alkali flat. Beyong that flat is a place they call Hell's Kitchen, hereabouts. Supposed to be no water there. The Injuns say it's the home of evil spirits, an' I reckon they're about right. But there is water there, good water, too. Couple year ago I built me a shack there and drove me a nice prospect entry into as pretty a formation as ever you see. I didn't find anything but rock though. Plenty of that. But I did learn a heap about Hell's Kitchen. Night before last I come through thar on my way in. Calc'lated to camp in my shack, so I kept humpin' after dark. When I gets thar, I sees a light in the shack, so I slips up an' takes me a look. There's a plumb hard lookin' crowd in thar. One of 'em I recognizes as Tex Heller, the same bein' wanted by at least fourteen separate an' distinct sheriffs. Where Tex Heller is, thar's devilment on, so I ambles away from that pronto.

"Now if that's the gang that pulled this job, an' I'll stake anythin' I got that it is, they're holed up right thar till things quiet down a bit, or I'll eat my shirt, an' the same ain't fit food at that!"

As Pete talked they had been riding slowly across the mesquite flat. Jud scratched his head and looked skeptically at his companion. "Granted they are there, and that they pulled this job, do you expect us two alone to stack up against such a gang?"

"Well, it's thisaway, as I figures it. They'll be so plumb certain nobody will ever look over in Hell's Kitchen for 'em that maybe we can catch 'em nappin' We can at least locate yore brother and maybe with some of the breaks we can do better'n that. Then if we really got the goods, we can get help."

"All right, let's go." Jud spurred his horse ahead. As he reached the foot of the slope a yell from Pete caused him to pull in.

"Hey! Don't be so danged ambitious, young feller!" Pete complained as he caught up. "This ain't no Arabian steed I'm forkin' here. Besides we got a long trail ahead."

THE canyon that loomed ahead was a huge cleft in the rugged walls that paralleled the river, the mark of some titanic upheaval in bygone ages. The afternoon was hot, and the canyon floor was rough and steep, so for the most part the two rode in silence. Occasionally Pete stopped and pointed out signs of recent travel, a slightly misplaced stone, a broken twig, or a scratch on a rock made by shod hoofs. Slower and slower plodded the weary horses as they climbed till at last they left the bed of the canyon at a point selected by Pete. A short, sharp ascent brought them to the crest of a sort of saddle. From this point another canyon dropped away rapidly, widening out far below on the alkali flat from which the blinding glare of the sun was reflected. Beyond lay a jumbled and broken mass of red rock, bare, savage, forbidding. Clear cut the jagged points stood out against the brazen sky.

"Hell's Kitchen!" said Pete as he saw Jud staring out over the sun baked scene.

"We'll camp here till dark," Pete announced as he dismounted. "No use goin' out thar on the flat in daylight. The cayuses need a rest anyway, and I'm hungry."

While Jude picketed the horses out for a scanty meal of dry grass, Pete delved in his roll and capacious saddlebags and brought forth an array of food and utensils. Presently from a tiny fire there arose an aroma of coffee, bacon and flapjacks that made Jud forget his troubles for the moment.

"Come an' get it!" Pete sang out, and they fell to.

With nothing to do but wait for night, Rattlesnake Pete alternately dozed and told rambling yarns of his endless quest. As for Jud, he sat staring, hopelessly out over the desolate glaring scene before him till his eyes ached and he closed them. When he opened his eyes, the sun was nearly down and Pete was busy preparing another pot of coffee. Darkness followed quickly on the heels of sunset and presently the two were on the trail again. Straight out across the alkali flat, Pete led without hesitation, to the mouth of a black, forbidding gorge cleft in the solid rock of Hell's Kitchen.

"Canyon Diablo," he said as they plunged into the deep shadows.

Like vague specters the serrated ridges rose on either hand against the star studded sky, their height greatly exaggerated in the uncertain light. It had

seemed dark out on the flat, but now Jud had difficulty in seeing his companion at all. Higher and higher they climbed, the ground becoming more rocky and broken as they proceeded. Presently Pete stopped and considered.

"My shack and the only waterhole within twenty mile, are right over the ridge at the head of that there gulch," he indicated a gash in the flanks of Canyon Diablo. "We'll leave the hosses on this side but I've got a hunch to put 'em in the next gulch. Somebody might be goin' in or out this way."

Having disposed of the horses, they proceeded on foot up the steep slope of the ridge. As they neared the top, Pete proceeded with more caution. Motioning to Jud, they crawled the last few feet flat on the ground. On the far side, the ridge sloped away somewhat more gently and clumps of piñon pines here and there gave it a not unpleasant aspect. Suddenly Jud felt a grip on his arm and following Pete's finger, he saw a light gleaming through the trees. Inch by inch they crept down the slope till the shack was in full view. They had approached within possibly a hundred feet when as luck would have it, Jud's foot dislodged a round stone that went rolling and clattering down the slope till it brought up with a resounding crash against the side of the cabin. Almost instantly the light went out. For what seemed an eternity they lay there behind a huge slab of slide rock, their own restrained breathing the only sound breaking the deathlike quiet.

AS HE lay tense and quiet, Jud became aware that he was resting against a sharp point of rock that soon became uncomfortable, then unbearable. He moved and instantly a spurt of flame leaped from one of the windows. A bullet spat viciously on the rock, throwing a shower of fragments in his face. Pete fired at the flash, the two shots rolling and echoing down the canyon, then silence. From far up on a ridge a wildcat's plaintive cry floated weirdly on the breeze that sighed through the pines. Pete cursed softly. The tension was becoming unbearable. Cautiously he raised his hat over the top of the rock. Nothing happened. To the left of the cabin Jud thought he saw something move. He stared intently and nudged Pete. A shadow, perhaps, or just his overstrained fancy. Again he saw it, this time a little farther to the left. He took careful aim, then hesitated. Suppose that was Bill?

"Don't move, buddy, you're covered!" he shouted. "This is Jud!"

At the sound of his voice the shadow started moving swiftly down the slope.

"Don't let him get away," Pete hissed, "He'll spill the beans sure."

In a flash Jud was after him and gaining rapidly. Down the slope they raced, setting up a terrific clatter of rolling stones. Seeing that escape was impossible the man suddenly turned, whipped out a gun and fired. Jud felt his hat fly from his head as he returned the shot. The man collapsed and lay still. Making sure that he was not shamming, Jud turned and hurried up the slope toward the cabin, meeting Pete half way up.

"Did ye get him?" Pete asked anxiously, and being reassured they turned toward the cabin together.

The door of the cabin stood open and Jud entered cautiously, gun in hand, half expecting to feel the smashing blow of a bullet. For a moment he stood tense, Pete close behind him, then ventured to strike a match and light the lamp that stood on a table in the center of the room.

"Drilled him clean the first shot," he heard Pete mutter behind him. He turned to see the old prospector bending over the sprawled figure of a man lying in front of a half open window.

Jud looked curiously about the dimly lighted shack. At one end a double deck bunk was built in. At the other was a cook stove, a wood fire still crackling. The table in the center, a couple of rude chairs, and a variety of skins and paraphernalia on the rough walls, completed the furnishings. He looked again at the sprawled figure on the floor, and misgiving gripped his heart. They had killed two men. And on what pretext? A crazy old prospector's hunch! He sat down, his back to the gruesome sight. Pete had gone outside to reconnoiter. Something, he knew not exactly what, fixed Jud's gaze on the lower bunk. Did those blankets move? He stared, fascinated. There could be no mistake that time. He leaped to the side of the bunk and threw the blankets back. Under them lay a man, his wrists bound to the side rails, his feet lashed together. A bloody bandage swathed his head and

his face was ashen. A choking cry escaped Jud as he bent over.

"Bill!"

The sunken eyes fluttered open. "Hello, Jud," he smiled faintly.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" Rattlesnake Pete gaped over Jud's shoulder. "I reckon my hunch was right at that. I was beginnin' to get right squeamish, knockin' off hombres like that."

"Here too," said Jud as he slashed the bonds and chafed his brother's numbed hands back to life.

"Ha! Here's what he needs." Pete completed a survey of the room by taking a bottle from a shelf. He sniffed, tasted, then took a long pull.

"Good medicine, that," he smacked his lips and held the bottle for Bill.

Somewhat revived Bill sat up and stretched his aching legs. "How much help have you boys got?" he asked anxiously, glancing at his watch.

"Nary a one but us," Pete answered cheerfully.

"Well, where are the two bandits they left here?"

"There's one," Jud pointed to the inert figure on the floor.

"T'other's outside," Pete added. "Both good Injuns."

"Boys, there's going to be hell to pay tonight." Bill looked anxiously at his brother. "I'll tell you what I know and then we'll see what we can do."

"YESTERDAY morning—was it yesterday? Well, anyway, we got the payroll at the express office and started out for camp. Nothing unusual happened till we got to the big bend, then a dozen shots cracked out all at once. The flivver stalled and Jackson went down with a bullet clear through his head. Meeker fired back and that seemed to hold them for a moment. I grabbed the money, jumped out and ran for the brush, Meeker after me. Meeker went down at the second jump and I didn't get much farther. The next I knew I was tied on a horse, pluggin' along through the sagebrush and rocks in the hot sun. Then after what seemed an interminable time, we got here.

"I let on I was still unconscious, so I heard and saw a lot. There were six in the gang including those two here. But I gathered that there was a seventh, the real leader, who was not present and who seems to be connected with the Circle Z ranch!"

Jud started, grew pale, but said nothing.

"Fact is," Bill continued, "I'm sure it's Carerra, the foreman. Seems he got that job on some forged recommendations. He picked on the Circle Z as being a convenient center of operations. He directs this gang of his, get's 'em located in jobs at convenient places. His particular specialty seems to have been preying on farming communities and projects, deliberately stirring up the natural antipathy of the cattlemen for all such things, as a cloak for his operations, and getting by with it. Things have been gettin' pretty warm lately and the gang has decided to make one grand cleanup before dropping over the border for good. They started the cleanup yesterday with our payroll.

"But that isn't all of the game. Not by a jugful! They're going to hold up the eastbound express on the Southern Pacific at four in the morning. Seems there's a big shipment of gold going through tonight and I understand the line passes within a few miles of here"

Bill looked inquiringly at Pete, who nodded confirmation.

"After the holdup they intend to leave my body on the scene for a blind and head for the border. Meantime the other four have gone back to the Circle Z where they're to meet Carerra. And Jud, I'm—I'm sure Carerra intends to kidnap Laura Shelton and take her over the border with him!"

Jud leaped to his feet with a stifled cry.

"Don't fly off the handle, Jud," Bill cautioned. "Only cool action can get us all out of this mess now. It's already past eleven and they've probably started from the ranch. Too late to stop 'em there. I understand it's about two hours hard ride from the ranch to here and another two to the railroad. They'll be here sometime before two.

"Now here's what I suggest," Bill spoke rapidly. "Pete, you ride as hard as you can for the Circle Z, keeping clear of the gang, and get old man Shelton and some of his men. They'll move fast when they find what's happened. You'll have to leave me tied up here so as not to excite suspicion. If I were gone, when they get back, they'd get scared and bolt for the border with the

girl. Leave the two dead ones here on the floor. Fix 'em as though they had killed each other in a fight. Then, Jud, you hang off and keep track of where we go and maybe you can help Shelton find us. I think Pete can make better time going to the ranch alone as he will have to be pretty careful to give the gang the slip. What say boys?"

Pete jumped up. "Come on, Jud. Bill's got the right idea this time."

And so the grim scene was set. Two dead men sprawled on the floor, their pistols in their hands; an empty whisky bottle; a deck of cards scattered on the table and floor; the dullest wits could picture the rest.

Up and down the cabin floor Jud paced, his hands clenched till the nails bit into the palms. Was there nothing he could de to break up this fiendish plot? What chance had Pete to get help back in time? A forlorn hope at best. Then must he sacrifice his brother for the sake of his sweetheart and stand by to see both go to destruction? His soul cried out in anguish and his breath came in short sobs. Then suddenly his face hardened as the full realization came upon him that he must depend entirely upon his own wits. That he had a very real advantage over the enemy in that he could spring a complete surprise, he realized clearly. Yet what the nature of this surprise should be he could not now guess.

"Better tie me up and get out of sight now, Jud," Bill interrupted the revery. "You can't tell when the gang may show up now."

Jud obeyed reluctantly. "Hate to do it, old man, but I suppose it's the only way."

From several lariats hanging on the wall he selected one, using part of it for the job at hand. He hung the remainder of the rope over his shoulder, took a final look over the situation and with a parting word of encouragement to Bill, he went out.

"Don't be surprised at anything that may happen," he called back as he closed the door.

OUT under the star studded sky once more, he looked the ground over carefully. The cabin stood on a slope that dropped away to the shadowy depths of a wide canyon below. To the rear, and off to one side was a corral built of saplings and twigs in the approved Mexican style. Beyond the corral was a small ravine that ended abruptly in a massive outcrop of rock at the foot of which was the waterhole, the only one in Hell's Kitchen. Beyond this again was a great pile of loose rock, the spoil bank from Rattlesnake Pete's prospect, a grim monument to months of fruitless toil. Just above the waterhole Jud found a spot where he could sit with little danger of detection in the darkness, yet with a good view of the corral and the cabin as well as the approach from the ridge above. He lighted a cigarette and settled himself to await developments.

Time dragged on; and in spite of the tension Jud dozed. Then suddenly he stiffened, wide awake. Over the ridge came the clatter of hoofs and a band of horsemen swept down the slope. They came to a halt at the corral and dismounted. He counted five men. A sixth figure remained mounted, a slight figure with drooping shoulders and bowed head. For an instant Jud's heart seemed to stand still, then a surge of hot passion filled him and he groaned to himself at the effort to hold his impulse in check. Even in the darkness Jud had no difficulty in identifying the leader as Carerra.

"Pedro! You and Jose stay here with the horses," the leader snapped. "Come on boys, I'll take the girl around front with me. I don't trust these greasers."

They disappeared around the corner of the cabin, the girl still on her horse. A moment of silence followed the creaking of the rusty hinges, then a volley of lurid oaths rang out on the still night air.

Jud smiled grimly as he pictured the scene and realized the blow the loss of two henchmen must be to the leader of the gang. He turned his attention to the two Mexicans at the corral. They were typical border natives, clothed in dirty ragged overalls and wearing broad brimmed, high peaked straw hats. The night was chill and each had on a short coat with collar turned up, effectively hiding their features. At the moment they seemed to be engaged in an argument. Jud had picked up enough Spanish to understand the drift of the conversation as far as he could hear it.

"I tell you, Jose, Don Carerra commanded *me* to watch the horses. There-

fore you go to the spring and get water for both of us. Jose, I command it!"

With a muttered response Jose turned and slouched sullenly toward the spring. Jud stiffened. Fortune was smiling upon him at last! The Mexican fumbled about, found a rusty tin cup and stooped to fill it. As he bent Jud sprang. He landed squarely on the man's back and before he could cry out, brought the butt of his gun down with a sickening thud. The Mexican collapsed and Jud, working swiftly, proceeded to trade clothing. Normally he would have revolted at contact with these dirty garments, rich with the scent of goats, but now nothing mattered. He buckled on the man's belt which contained a wicked looking knife, then swiftly bound his victim hand and foot, gagged him with a piece of his own shirt and dragged him out of sight down the ravine. With a piece of charcoal from the remains of some campfire he smeared his own face and hands, so that with the coat collar turned up and the hat pulled well down, he felt fairly safe from detection, the Mexican being of similar build. Yet whatever he hoped to accomplish must be done before daylight arrived.

Dipping up a cupful of water he slouched back to where Pedro sat in his saddle cursing him and his ancestors vehemently for his procrastination. This flow of language was cut short by the appearance of the rest of the gang. With them was Bill Powers, his hands tied behind his back. Bill was hoisted into a saddle and the others mounted swiftly. Jud hung back. He didn't want to be too much in evidence, but he had no idea which horse he should take till the others were all mounted. Carerra turned.

"Move, you dog!" he hissed and struck Jud a stinging blow over the shoulders with his quirt. Gritting his teeth, Jud swung into the vacant saddle and fell into line.

SINGLE file the riders picked their way along the trail that worked its way down the steep slope to the canyon floor below. Carerra was in the lead. Behind him rode the girl. Her face was white and drawn as she stared blankly, hopelessly, straight ahead. At her side, tied to the saddle, dangled the guitar, a pitiful reminder of happier days. Next came the two white bandits, hard faced, desperate. The first, Jud had heard called Tex, the second was known as the Bull. Then came Bill Powers, his hands still tied behind him, his feet lashed to the stirrups. The Mexican and Jud trailed the column. The trail soon became so narrow that two could not ride safely abreast. To the right the piñon dotted slope reached upward toward the dim ridges above. To the left a chaotic jumble of rocks and stunted trees fell away into a black and seemingly bottomless abyss.

The moment for action had come. Stealthily Jud closed up the gap between himself and the man ahead, then suddenly crowded his horse up abreast the Mexican. The latter hissing something about keeping in line, raised his quirt to strike. As his hand descended Jud caught it and with a violent jerk, threw him off balance. At the same instant he gave the Mexican's horse a quick rake with his spur. The animal leaped sideways, lost his footing in the loose stones at the edge of the trail, and stumbled to his knees. His rider, unable to regain his seat, was thrown headlong among the jagged rocks where he rolled over and lay still in the starlight, a great gash showing on his forehead.

Carerra pulled up, took one look at the fallen man, cursed him for a blundering fool and let him lie. Obviously he suspectd nothing yet, least of all the sleepy looking Mexican who slouched in his saddle at the tail of the column. The maneuver had, however, accomplished the desired result of placing Jud directly behind Bill. Taking advantage of the confusion that followed, Jud acted quickly and with precision. It required but an instant to crowd his horse past his brother's, and in passing to slash the bonds that held Bill's wrists, to whisper a word of instruction, and to snatch the coiled lariat from Bill's saddle, leaving the end still attached.

Cautiously he shook out the loop and carefully he estimated the distance to the Bull's broad shoulders that loomed directly ahead. Jud never had considered himself an expert with a rope, but he had practiced throwing as a pastime under old Pete's instruction. Now he staked everything on the throw and on Bill's ability to get going quickly enough. As the loop whistled through the air, the Bull half turned in his saddle but before he realized what was

happening, the rope snapped up around his arms and went taut. Cursing wildly he was jerked violently from his saddle and went skittering along the rough trail as Bill urged his horse back toward the shack.

A sharp cut with the quirt sent the riderless horse plunging wildly through the group ahead, who had again halted to find out the cause of the disturbance. The horse dashed between Carerra and the girl, tearing the lead reins from his hands. The girl's mount, startled by the commotion and finding himself free, bolted down the trail at a reckless pace while Carerra, fairly shrieking oaths of helpless rage, spurred his horse on in pursuit, followed by Tex. Jud, his heart leaping with a savage joy of conflict he had never before experienced, was on them before they had fairly started. He thrust his horse abreast of Tex, crowding him over toward the lower side of the trail. The bandit turned with a snarl that ended in a gasp of surprise as he perceived the identity of this blundering peon. With a yell to Carerra, he whipped out his gun, but Jud was prepared for this move and his own shot sent the outlaw toppling from his saddle.

At the shot Carerra whirled, gun in hand, to see Jud bearing down upon him. Jud fired and missed while Carerra's first shot a split second later struck Jud's gun and sent it flying from his grasp. Before Carerra could fire again the horses came together with a violent shock. Jud lunged desperately at the leader's gun and succeeded in deflecting the next shot downward. The next instant he felt his horse sag under him. He went down, but Carerra went with him and the two rolled, battered and half stunned to the ground.

Carerra was a powerful man, as Jud soon realized. From the moment of their first violent contact, Jud had maintained a desperate grip on the bandit's gun arm, which was his left, and as they rolled over had succeeded in starting a hammerlock with the other arm. He soon discovered, however, that the shock of the bullet that knocked his gun from his hand had left his hand somewhat numb and that he could not complete the hold with its devastating results without a fatal letting up on the bandit's gun. Several moments they lay there, hot breath coming in painful gasps. Carerra's face, distorted by passion, leered up at Jud who realized that he was gradually loosing his grip and that the wicked muzzle of the gun was slowly but surely turning toward him. The gun roared. Jud felt a searing pain in his shoulder and the flash scorched his face, half blinding him. As his right arm went limp, he gathered all his remaining strength into one desperate heave, released the outlaw's right arm and swung his own fist with a crashing impact to his adversary's jaw. Carerra's head snapped back and he went limp, the gun clattering down among the rocks. Jud staggered to his feet and retrieved the weapon.

When presently Carerra opened his eyes and looked wildly about, he found his hands tied securely behind him.

"Get up, hombre, and march!" a sharp voice commanded as he turned bewildered to see his captor mounted on his own horse and covering him with his own gun.

"I'm getting a bit weak," the voice continued, "and if I don't find that girl before I get too far, I intend to drill you, just to be on the safe side. So move!"

THE golden glow of dawn was breaking over the ridges, blotting the stars one by one from their places, when a group of horsemen halted at a fork in the trail. Three men were in the lead. One, a dark heavy set man with a gleaming silver star showing under his coat, removed his black hat and ran his hand meditatively through his thick black hair. The second, a leather faced veteran of the range, also wore a star. The third was Jake Shelton, his face set in hard grim lines. Behind them Rattlesnake Pete slouched in his saddle and winked sagely at Bill Powers as they listened to the sheriff's conversation. A dozen or so grim faced cowpunchers brought up the rear.

"And yuh say there were seven of 'em that pulled the job over in Alamo County?" the first sheriff asked for the dozenth time.

"Yeh," the other sheriff drawled wearily. "Seven of 'em. One we caught an' he squealed. Said this hombre Carerra was backin' 'em, though he hardly ever got in on a job himself. Well, we've already accounted for six. Two in the shack, one Mex at the spring an' one by the trail with his head stove in;

then there's Tex Heller crawlin' up the trail with a slug in his carcass and the Bull that Powers had hogtied. Three for the jug; three for a spade party."

"And that leaves the kingpin missin'," growled the first sheriff. "We still got to find Carerra. Also young Powers and the girl. If it hadn't been for this old coot holdin' me up this mornin'," he glowered at Pete, "I might have had 'em all in the cooler now. I got a notion to shove him in with the rest of 'em!"

Jake snorted. "Say, if you calc'late to administer justice in this yere county any appreciable length o' time, lay off!"

For a moment there was silence. A soft sweet scented breeze whispered among the piñons in a gulch to the right. Softly now stronger, now fainter, there was wafted down that wild ravine the mournful notes of a guitar.

AND so they found them. The girl sitting on a flat rock dreamily plucking at the instrument; Jud Powers, his face ashen under the smudge of charcoal, and his arm in an improvised sling, sat beside her. Jake Shelton was the first to arrive. He leaped from his horse and Laura flung her arms around his neck, laughing happily. The sheriffs were more interested in a snarling, cursing figure that lay a short distance away. When at last he had freed himself, Jake turned to Jud.

"Boy, you shore busted up that party! Now you all get back to the ranch as quick as you can and we'll have ol' Doc Sawbones from Morelos come an' patch you up. You stay right there till yo're better, sabe? I'd go back with you, but I got a thousand head of steers supposed to start on a drive down Texas way this mornin' come sunup, so I'll amble along."

"Speaking of steers, Mr. Shelton," Jud grinned, "if you had some working agreement with the Farmers' Association now, you wouldn't have to——"

"Yeh. I know," Jake laughed. "When I get back, an' after you tell me how you pulled this stunt, we'll have us a little powwow on that subject. I guess maybe we'll tell that fellow back in New York where to get off. Meanwhile, Laura, I'm appointin' you head nurse in this case. *Adios!*"

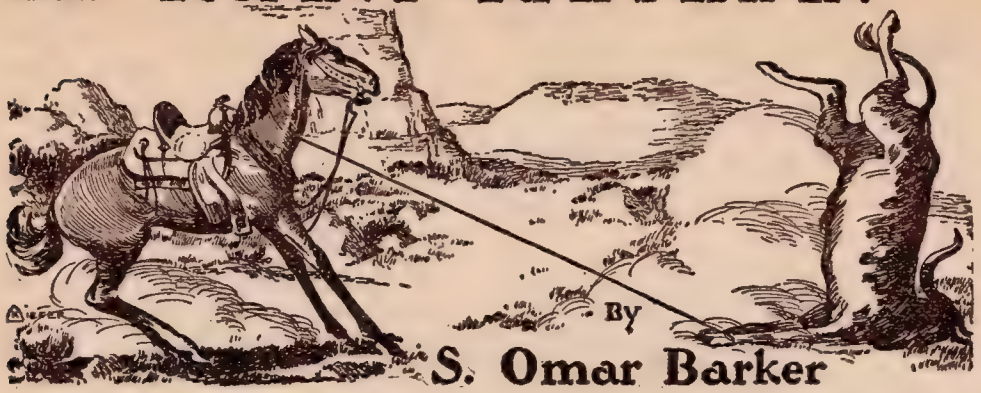
For a moment Rattlesnake Pete hung back while he adjusted the band on his old hat.

"I got a hunch," he smiled happily to himself, "I got a hunch I know what I'll have made from the first ounce of gold I get from that danged prospect!"

AN INDIAN PORTRAIT

IN THE 1830's an artist who painted Indian portraits along the Missouri River had a lot of superstition to overcome before he could get models. The almost universal belief among the savages was that the artist took something from the personality of the sitter and put it into the other self. Presents, arguments, playing the conceit of one Indian against that of another, finally won him his way with them; but in one case the portrait proved to be fatal, and made a lot of trouble. A Sioux chief, Little Bear, posed for a profile portrait, and a surly chief by the name of The Dog sneeringly said that Little Bear was but half a man; that he knew it, and the artist knew it because he only painted half the face, knowing the other to be no good. This started some pretty hot repartee, from which grew an ill will that neither of the chiefs tried to ease. Both went to their lodges and loaded their guns, but Little Bear's wife secretly drew the ball from her husband's weapon. They met, exchanged shots, and while The Dog was uninjured, one side of Little Bear's face was blown away; and it was the side not shown in the portrait! A battle ensued between the friends of the two chiefs, but The Dog and his party escaped. The artist packed up his paraphernalia in a hurry and he and his companions prepared to defend themselves. Only tact, manifestations of deep sorrow and liberal gifts saved him and his party from grave consequences, and the warfare started by the portrait continued intermittently among the Indians all that summer. The Dog, having been killed, made the Indians put the blame for the death of both chiefs on the artist who, needless to say, took good care to keep away from this tribe.—*C. E. Mulford*

OL' ROANY RANAHAN



By

S. Omar Barker

The big blue roan steer had made his home on the uplands near Venado Canyon. An incorrigible outlaw, he fought a lifelong battle against starvation, foes of the wild, and—man, his greatest enemy. But read the story; it is one you will remember.

FIVE Drag Arrow cowboys, bringing out a bunch of wild hill cattle from the black canyons and rough ridges of the already snow skiffed mountains northwest of Hillsboro in the fall of 1910, yelled and cussed themselves hoarse. Already they had been obliged to rope two of the wildest steers and clog them in order to make the drive at all. A cold wind, sharp and piercing as cactus thorns, whipped in upon them through every little draw, adding neck cold to the misery the deer wild cattle were dealing them.

It was not strange then, that when, nearing the foothills of the winter range, one old sharp horned cow and her calf dodged suddenly back up a narrow side canyon, they let her go.

"She'll foller, damn her skin!" shouted Frosty Makinson, "or by hell she kin go thar! Let 'er go!"

One of the boys had started after her, the sharp wind in his face, but he was glad enough to drop the chase and come back to *"hee-ya-ah"* after the others.

But the old spotted longhorn mother and her high hipped, lanky, blue roan steer calf did not "foller." Both of them with heads up, and the calf with his tail high in the excitement of escape, hit a high trot up the trailless rocky bottom of the little canyon that led back toward the mountains where, except for the day he was roped and branded, the little roan calf had never been near a human being. For half a mile they kept up their swift pace, their nostrils puffing clouds of steamy breath into the cold air, little flecks of blubbery foam dropping from their mouths.

Then, out of hearing of the herd, the wild old mother stopped and looked back. She bawled twice querulously as if asking herself which she would rather do; turn back and follow the herd, or return, alone but for the panting calf at her side, to the dark high slopes and canyons of the mountains, far from the hateful disturbance of men on horseback. Her decision, once made, was final. Together she and the lank thighed blue calf followed a steady, upslanting course through canyons, over rough ridges, along steep slopes until, two days later, morning found them in one of the sun facing, grassy coves of Venado Canyon far toward its head.

Here in these upper coves they wintered. The snow piled deep in the bottoms and on the north facing slopes where the low slung sun could not reach it. Sometimes it was hard going to have to nose out the grass, even on the sunny slopes, from under a foot or more of snow. Yet some strange stubbornness in the old longhorn mother kept her from drifting out again to the foothills. The cold itself did not bother them much, for there was always warm tree shelter from the wind under the great branchy spruces of the narrow canyons.

Coyotes, ease-footing themselves along on the crust of snowdrifts on their long, ranging jaunts through the hills in search of carrion or quarry, stopped to

sniff in pleased surprise at the warm scent of cattle this far back in the mountains in the dead of winter. Several of them lingered a day or two in the coves where the longhorn and her calf grazed, watching hopefully. Cows in the deep snow of the high places this time of year, so experience had taught the coyotes, are likely to get thin and die.

But these yellow eyed prowlers, four footed buzzards of the Western hills, misjudged old Horny and her high hipped roan baby. Thin and shanky they did get toward spring, but a couple of ambitious coyotes, mistaking thinness for weakness, and attacking them, got the most painful surprise of their howling lives. They found old Horny an almost silent but very straight hooking, sharp weaponed fighter and the blue calf no less *bravo* than his mother, with the result that the appetite for fresh beef seemed to abandon them, and they streaked out for the jackrabbit foothills, pausing now and then to lick anxiously at some bloody gashes in their hides.

SPRING came with the talking sounds of black water gurgling and giggling down the hills and draws from the coarse white mush of great snowdrifts, and finally roaring off in booming rivers that had been mere creeks and dry canyons before. And soon thereafter, when the porous earth had sponged up the bogs and snowholes, and started upshooting green bristles of grass in their places, there was the sound of new cattle bawling in the canyons as the Drag Arrow cowboys shoved the lean, shanky herds up from the ranches to their summer range.

Old Horny welcomed the arrival of her kind with eager *"mm-mm's"* vibrating roundly from her skinny throat; and then, after the belligerent fashion of all cows, promptly bowed her neck and offered sidestepping, bellowing defiance to one and sundry of the newcomers. The roan calf, in one winter, had already forgotten the existence of any cow animals except his mother. He took turns coming near them and then running off in uncertain fright.

But when the cowboys came *hee-ya-ah-ing* along behind the herd there was no uncertainty in the shaggy yearling's fear. At sound and sight of them he forgot his interest in the newly arrived cattle; forgot, momentarily, even his mother, and hightailed himself off in a long stiff trot into the timber fringes out of sight.

Frosty Makinson spied old Horny and saw the yearling pull out.

"Hee-yi-i-i-yee-i!" he yelled, and the calf ran all the harder.

"Lookit who's yonder," Frosty said to Bill Green. "Durned if ol' Horny ain't wintered up hyer! 'Member lettin' her git back on us las' fall? Lookit how that thar yearlin' runs! Li'l Boney Roany son-of-a-gun! Wilder'n a antelope!"

Through the summer Li'l Boney Roany filled his paunch with sweet mountain grasses so industriously that the cowboys quit calling him Li'l Boney and switched the nickname to "Ol' Roany Ranahan." Not many steers, or cows either for that matter, ever attain to the honor of nicknames, or even the general title of ranahan (which means a "wilder'n-hell-steer"), but this one earned his. No sooner would he see a puncher come in sight in a glade or a burn or on a point than up would fly his tail and hellbent away he would go out of sight. He trotted head high around the fringes of the herd at the salt grounds, ready at the first sign of a man to scoot for cover. Old Horny, his mother, had another calf early in the summer, but Roany still stayed with her, as much because she was the wildest company he could find, as anything else. Both of them spent a good deal of their time skeedaddling through the brush to keep away from men on horseback.

Yet it was a wonderful summer for the young steer. He grew long and tall as well as fat, on the succulent mountain forage. As if with the instinct of an animal born wild he took to bedding down, whenever he lay down either day or night, always on some high point where he could see about him. His horns grew prodigiously and gave promise of an even wider spread than those of old Horny herself.

One day Bill Green, riding, on a counting trip, up to the impasse head of a narrow canyon to make sure he hadn't missed any Drag Arrow stuff, came suddenly upon Roany Ranahan in a corral-like spring cove. The passage down the *cañoncito* was only a few feet

wide and there was no other getaway for the steer. Bill Green, with his rope arm ever aching for action, saw a chance for a little practice and maybe some fun with this "wild 'un." Grinning to himself, he dropped a loop over the spikey horns of the bovine youngster, set the pony to hold him and started to get off for a little bulldogging practice in the cove that headed the draw. But Roany didn't wait for him. He gave one wild, breath snorting look around for escape when the rope tightened on his head and saw only cliff walls, everywhere except down the trail out of the cove—and there stood the cowboy's horse in his way.

With a wild bellowing bawl Roany quit setting back on the rope and came, red eyed and head high, straight at the horse. Bill grabbed his tail and gave him a sidewise yank but Roany kept on, made one snorting lunge at the pony that grazed his flank, and then plunged past him down the rock boxed trail out of the cove. As he passed, the well trained pony whirled to face him and hold him. The rope came taut and Roany was suddenly busted end for end. But as he fell the tight rope came against a bit of sharp, jutting rock and sawed itself in two, so that when the steer got up again he was free. He ran madly off athwart a steep slant, ten feet of Bill Green's rope dragging from his horns.

"The salty sonofagun!" exclaimed Bill Green alliteratively, half in disgust, half in admiration. "The durned wahoo little ranyhan!"

FROM then on Roany Ranahan was wilder than ever. He wore Bill's broken rope most of the summer. It bothered and frightened him. It would tighten when he happened to step on it and soon made his head sore around the horns. Finally, rubbing in a fir sapling to ease the itching soreness, he got it off. Thereafter he saw to it that no cowboy got close enough to him to put another one on him.

That fall when the boys gathered and started driving down out of the hills Roany plainly didn't "savvy." Most of the other cattle, wild longhorn stuff though they were, were headed with much hard, breakneck riding on the rocky slants, down the converging trails that led to the sheltered grass of distant foothills and mesas. Some of them, of course, would be driven on almost to the river and then be headed north to the crossing to the loading pens on the railroad, thence to be shipped to El Paso or Kansas City. But for himself the rangy blue yearling had other plans. Lithe and agile on the rocky steeps that were home to him, he gave the Drag Arrow cowboys what old Frosty called "hightailed hell"; but gradually they headed him and cut him off and crosscut on him until he started with the herd, keeping, with his wary eyed old mother, well to the fringe of the moving cattle.

Yet he went reluctantly, turning every now and then to gaze with a proudly held head back toward the coves of Venado Canyon. And this year, at the back slanting mouth of a side canyon, it was old Horny that followed her high trotting yearling in one last mad break for the high hills, and not Roany Ranahan that trailed his mother.

Escape they did, Horny's chunky red calf with them, and traveled, foam flecks at their mouths, almost without stopping until the somber shadowed spruces of Venado Canyon welcomed them again in the slant sun of late afternoon.

That night under the chilled steel stars of early winter the blue ranahan, almost a swagger in his stride of freedom in the hills, led old Horny and her calf to a little flat under spruces he knew on a ridgetop; and there they bedded. If there drifted up to him from the faraway foothills any sounds or smells of men or their fenced in herds Roany gave them no more notice than a faint, contented wrinkling of his nose as he chewed his cud.

The months that followed rode the snow horse hard and gaunted the trio in Venado Canyon mightily. Coyotes prowled; and in blizzard driven darkness these three faced and fought them. But the red calf, chunky and fat though he had been in summer, somehow lacked the fighting stamina of his year older brother, and the slim wolves got him. Well enough for old Horny that they did, for his drag at her udder, along with the short feed and cold, had her ribs showing by New Year's.

Not only did Roany and his mother

fight the snapping teeth of scavenger coyotes, but day by bitter day they battled, too, the silent white wolf of starvation, pawing and rooting under snow for grass, cropping close the woody twigs on willows and oaks in the cove where the snowdrifts bound them, and then, as a last resort, eating the tangy needles of spruce and fir.

Spring found them shaggy, alive and wild—wilder than ever. "Wilder'n a oil boom in hell," according to old Frosty, when he and the boys drove in the summer herds.

Old Horny was calfless this summer; and when the fall drive came she and Roany broke to their beloved Venado Canyon again and there Roany wintered, alone after old Horney got down in a snowdrift in March and died. He came out shaggier and poorer than ever with the thawing time of spring.

Yet such is the magic of new mountain grass that when fall gold leafed the aspens again Roany Ranahan, tall, rangy longhorn though he was, was fat enough for beef, sleek and smooth muscled.

"Cut the fat threes fer shippin'," said the foreman, and that included Roany.

THEY got him out of the high hills this time, too. They might have let him slip back on them again, but Bill Green, who had almost run a good horse down after him, had his dander up and swore by all cowboy and various other gods that no ranahan roughneck of a three-year-old could go by him. So Bill and another puncher roped him, head and heels, and when they had him stretched out they clogged him, which is to say that they tied a heavy chunk of pole wood to one of his front feet with rope strands.

Then they let him up, and Bill's companion, who didn't hurry to his horse fast enough, narrowly escaped the vicious plunge of sharp, curved horns aimed, along with a windy snort, at his retreating rear. Roany was on the fight; but the clog was too much for him. If he stopped to do battle the punchers dodged and whipped him with their ropes. If he tried running away the clog tripped him until he sprawled on the bruising rocks of hillside and canyon. Roany did not give up easily. At every backtwist of the trail, every side canyon's mouth, he would try to break back. But physically, at least, the cowboys had him whipped; and he had to move on with the bunch. Even in the night herd he found escape impossible, and a few days later they had him going, with a jostling hundred or two of other three-year-olds, on the long trail across sand hills, sharp canyons and greasewood flats to the railroad.

Dodging the more barren, drouth blasted, canyon sliced country, the Drag Arrow outfit headed eastward to the Rio Grande, whence they would turn northward up the river to the shipping chutes at San Marcial. They took the clog from Roany's foot to keep it from laming him, but he promptly sniffed toward the hills and began to hightail it for freedom, and they had to rope and clog him again, this time tying it to the other front foot. And so, toward the unknown doom of a distant slaughter house the jostling beef herd clatter-hoofed along, dusty cowboys *"hee-ya-ah-ing"* and chap-slapping behind them.

"Yuh're a gonner this time, Roany ol' boy," commented Frosty Makinson as he took a rope slap at the reclogged steer that sent him leaping frantically into the herd.

"'Twas in the sprin-ng of Eighty-three,
That ol' Jim Hanson says to me:
'You are the man to suit the time.'
Says I: 'Jim Hanson, ver-ry fine!'
Oo-eeooh! Oo-ee-oooo-eeee-ooooh!"

Frosty bellowed the old ballad hoarsely.

Across a draw and over a short ridge they came suddenly upon the river winding muddily a hundred yards ahead. The cattle stopped a moment, staring. Then all at once out ahead of the herd, in a hesitating, doubtful, clog crippled and yet swift high trot went the wild roan three-year-old. His hips smarting from slapping ropes, his eyes wildly red with the dust of travel and the torment of fear, his tail slanting out high behind him, he ran straight for the river.

"Lookit!" Frosty pointed as one of the other boys rode to head him. "Don't bust yerself, Jim," he yelled, "the river'll stop him!"

But it didn't—not for more than a second. With one look back at his hated pursuer and two at the water ahead, old Roany Ranahan plunged, clog and all,

into the Rio Grande and began to swim.

"Why, the son of a gun!" exclaimed Bill Green.

They saw him go under once, come up again and then, his horns barely above the water, swim slantingly to the other bank—luckily for him not far away at this point. They saw him give one almost taunting look back at them and then start on a limping trot toward the hills of the east bank.

"There goes yer ol' beefsteak, Bill," grinned Makinson. "Anybody want tuh swim the crick after him?"

Nobody did.

"The Quarter Circle M's'll pick him up, like as not, if that there clog don't ruin him," commented the foreman. "*He-ah-ah!* Git, ye scrubs!"

Hoarse with dusty yelling they proceeded northward.

But the Quarter Circle M's didn't pick up ol' Roany Ranahan. When the Drag Arrow stuff came leanly back up into the Venado Canyon country the next spring Roany was already there, rawboned and wilder than ever, to greet them!

"Looks like Ol' Roany aims to make his home here," said Bill Green when he saw him.

"D'yuh blame him, feller?" queried old Frosty, listening to the throoming of the spring thaw that was sweet old music in his ears.

The clog, of course, was gone from the steer's foot. The rope had evidently rotted off or worn out from continual dragging, but not before its chafing had made a sore above the hoof that left him with a misshapen, clubby foot and a ring of white hair below his ankle when it had healed.

Nor was that all. Old Roany had some long scratched lines on his rump, looking something like a pitchfork or turkey track brand, but in reality a testimonial to his valor and prowess left there in the snowy silence of winter by an overambitious cougar that had hankered for a taste of beef. The taste he got was mostly of hoof and horn, and as he had crawled away to die Old Roany's eyes had blazed hatred and defiance to the world. Everybody, everything, it seemed, was his enemy. And yet against them all—man, beast and wilderness winter—he had won. Alone though he was, and thus living contrary to the usual instincts of his kind, Roany Ranahan nevertheless knew a strange exultation when he bedded watchfully on cold winter nights beneath the spruces.

Summer passed quickly but fattening, and that fall he was marked again for the stockyards.

"Maybe you'd better just shoot him and pack in the meat," suggested the boss at the ranch.

"Hell, no!" This from Bill Green. "How come yuh think we cain't drive him? One helluva outfit that'd let one ol' roan steer buffalo 'em!"

It wasn't a "helluva outfit" by any means, but one roan steer didn't lack much of buffaloing them at that. Of course they had to clog him again. That meant roping him first. Frosty finally caught him and drew up his horse to "bust" the big four-year-old. But Roany somehow remembered this maneuver from the tumbles of the year before. Or perhaps he merely decided that the gong had rung for a fight. Instead of tightening the rope he turned and charged Frosty's horse, eyes wide open. He struck one long horn ineffectively into saddle leather and though it did not reach either men or horse the force of his charge knocked Frosty's pony down and sent the old cowboy scrambling for safety. But the steer's horns were too long. Before he could get action with the points of them another rope looped with a zip over his head and he was jerked back to his haunches.

It was a deadly, dangerous battle. Roany fought madly but almost in silence. Yet he was no match for the magic of cowboy ropes. They stretched him out and once more a great clog chucked and clumped at his foreleg.

Whether it was because they tied too swiftly, too nervously, or whether the roan's incessant breaks for liberty did it, or whether it was just a quirk of Fate to give him one more chance at freedom, will probably never be known, although Drag Arrow cowboys still will argue about it. But at any rate it did so happen. Roany's clog caught in a scrubby *sabina* clump and came off just as the shipping herd came up over the ridge in sight of the river. For a second he did not realize the clog was gone. Then he saw the water and broke for it, falling headlong the first leap because of the unnatural freedom of the chafed foot from which the weight had

been dropped. He was up as quick as he fell, and the cowboys, not realizing he had lost his clog, started too late to stop him.

They swore both in exasperation and admiration as they watched him crawl out, dripping but free, on the opposite bank.

"Ten dollars to the man that'll swim it and head him back," said the foreman.

There were no takers.

"Try headin' the devil outa hell some time, Doc," suggested Bill Green as he watched Old Roany, a huge bluish figure against the yellow sand, making highstepping tracks up a dry arroyo.

IN THE fall of 1915 it happened again. Old Roany, now a monster five-year-old with a spread of horns old Frosty said would reach "plumb acrost Texas," fought the Drag Arrow cowboys, lost temporarily, and then, finally, swam the Rio Grande again to safety.

They had varied the procedure this time at the foreman's suggestion. Instead of clogging him they stretched him out and propped his eyelids open with little sharpened sticks. Then when he would start to run his sense of distance would fool him. Close things looked far and far things close, and everything looked wrong enough to send him stumbling and sprawling at every attempted escape. To the average ranahan this is baffling enough to tame him in a short order, and make him stay with the herd. Far from being tamed by it, Old Roany was madly enraged. So much so that before they had gone far he charged blindly into a cedar clump and threshed it about so violently that the little sticks were torn out, leaving his eyes blurred with pain and blood but otherwise unhurt. And so once more he beat them to the saving flood of the Rio Grande.

In a day or two when he saw no more sign of them, Old Roany stepped into the water, swam back to the west banks and headed on westward. He wintered again in the Venado Canyon country among the snowdrifts and his old enemies of the wild—enemies he feared more yet hated less than man.

One cold twilight in January, nuzzling for snow buried grass clumps in the lee of a lime cliff, he met a new foe, more deadly than any he had yet encountered. A lone timber wolf, slinking out of Mexico and up through the less ridden back edges of the cow ranches, chanced to cross Venado Canyon and sniff Old Roany's track. Warm beef was no novelty to him but it most certainly was something he liked. Nor did he despise the blood shedding sport for getting it.

The old wolf reckoned poorly with the tenacity of life, the skill, the belligerence and guts of Old Roany. The big steer glimpsed him coming and whirled to meet him instead of running away. This alone was new to the lobo, accustomed as he was to hamstringing his beef as it tried to flee from him. Nevertheless he leaped in, snapping at the great blue nose. A long, curved horn, just a trifle too slow to take him with its point, struck the wolf's furry head a sidling blow and sent him tumbling. Back he came, snarling now with anger as well as with the food lust.

Old Roany felt himself trembling with sudden fear. He looked frantically about for a way of retreat. But he saw none; and so he advanced like a whirlwind upon his enemy. The wolf's teeth ripped into the side of his neck but he shook him off, caught a horn in the furry side and twisted it viciously. The lobo, for the first time in his hunting life, yelped with pain. But he did not retreat, and the next sickling of his white teeth ripped into Old Roany's right eye and tore it from its socket.

Madly, frantically now the steer horned at him, and the wolf, bleeding heavily from the goring of a moment before could not sidestep the repeated charging of the steer.

Old Roany stood that night in bewilderment and pain, blood dripping and freezing in red crusts from the hole where his right eye had been. But the body of the lobo from Mexico stiffened and froze without pain where it lay below the lime cliff.

The treachery of his half blindness kept Old Roany farther to the fringe of the grazing herds than ever the next summer, and time and again he ran snorting into the woods when nothing more dangerous than another cow had approached him on the blind side.

"We'll git yuh *this* fall, ol' boy, ol' Roany Ranahan!" chuckled Frosty

Makinson when he glimpsed the steer, showing himself fat in late summer. "We'll fool yuh! We'll see whether yuh swim any more rivers or not, ol' feller!"

FOR a number of years strange sights and sounds had been invading the desert of the Rio Grande. Great engines had been puffing, huge cranes lifting and setting down monstrous, monotonous burdens in a narrow just below where a dark butte overlooked the winding, chaneled river. In May of this year, which was 1916, a decisive, final turning point had been reached and most of the noisy operations had ceased. Old Frosty chuckled again to think about it. It would be a shame, of course, but it would be funny nevertheless. Poor ol' Roany!

The Drag Arrow cowboys did not discover that Old Roany was now one eyed, until they started again to drive him out in the fall. Then they found him almost pitifully easy to come up to from the right side, but dangerously hard to turn once they had headed him. In the chousing they got close enough to see the great hollow, ripped out cavity the wolf had left in place of his eye. From then on they drove him by strategy, making a game of it. Taking advantage of his blind side they got him so baffled and bewildered that, though he still fought like fury if a horse came directly in his way, he nevertheless failed to handle himself so well and blundered into other cattle and sharp horns so often that a few miles had him almost docile. They even found it unnecessary to clog him. But there was another element in his apparent docility, too.

Old Roany, once started, seemed to know this time where he was going. After all why fight these humans here, when he could so easily make for the river and escape them there? As they came nearer and nearer the Rio Grande Old Roany actually became a herd leader, traveling almost too fast for the others to be kept up to him.

It is rarely that one cow animal can attract the interest and attention of a whole outfit of cowboys. But Old Roany was one of the rare cases. Through six years of storm and strife he had earned the distinction.

"Lookit! Come on, lookit him! Watch ol' Roany git fooled, fellers!"

Bill Green, old Frosty and the rest—even the foreman—abandoned the rear of the herd and cut around at a gallop as the herd leaders, Old Roany among them, topped the greasewood ridge that brought them in sight of the water.

"Lookit! Lookit him! That there unstarches him, eh?" chuckled Frosty.

Old Roany, on the ridgetop, had come to a sudden stop. Head high with the surprise of unfamiliar things in familiar places, he gazed wide eyed out eastward where a great bluish lake of water lay over what had been the river bed and the neighboring flats and hillocks of the Rio Grande. Two miles or so down the river the great Elephant Butte Dam had, last May, been finished and the spillways closed, backing up the water. The narrow river Old Roany had been swimming each year to freedom now stretched almost out of sight across the valley.

The old steer weaved his head sidewise, up and down as if to clarify his vision. He turned to hook back another steer from his side while he viewed this strange new sight. And then, to the astonishment of the Drag Arrow cowboys, he suddenly gave them one defiant look, broke from the herd and trotted in a lank, hightailed gait to the edge of the water and plunged in.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Frosty.

They watched until all they could see of him was the long converging waves made from Old Roany's moving body in the water. Somewhere out there where the two waves met was Old Roany's and when he passed out of sight he was still swimming.

"By God, I'd like to know if he makes it!" said Bill Green.

"All right," said the foreman, "I'm damned if I ain't going to get that old he devil yet! Lookahere, Frosty, you and Bill drop out, ride down to the dam, cross over and go up the bank to see if that fool steer comes out. If he does he'll be all in—wore out—and you can drive him back around here easy. He'll see Kansas City yet!"

Old Frosty Makinson and Bill Green turned south and then urged skittish horses across the new driveway on top of the dam. About a mile and a half up the east bank of the lake they found Old Roany. He stood huddled and shiv-

ering as if he had just come out of the water.

"Lookit!" exclaimed Frosty. "He's swum it plumb acrost!"

They rode around him and headed him down the shore. He traveled in a dazed wobble. All the old high headed fire was gone from his bearing. He neither fought them nor tried to escape them. Somehow he looked pitifully gaunt shanked and lank. Frosty and Bill drove him along in silence.

"Kansas City fer you, ol'-timer," said Bill once when he had to slap him several times with a rope to keep him moving.

Half a mile down the shore line the mouth of a deepish gulch slanted in at their left. Looking back through it up the canyon that wound northeastward one could see great rugged mountains rising in the distance. Nearer were wooded foothills like those on the lower Venado across the river.

Suddenly Old Roany stopped. His great draggled, broad horned head went up in a feeble imitation of the old gesture of defiance. He cocked his wet ears toward the distant mountains and with his one good eye looked longingly toward them. Somewhere up yonder would be great sheltering spruce trees and perhaps clumpy bunch grass beside lime cliffs on slopes sun warmed even in winter. From the big steer's throat came a low *"mm-mm-mmmm"* as he gazed toward the free hills.

Then his great head came down and he turned humbly, dejectedly down the shore line of the lake in a dogged, foot dragging walk. Old Roany was whipped at last.

The two cowpunchers had stopped, watching him. All at once they galloped around ahead of him from his blind side. With strangely gentle rope slaps they headed him back up the mouth of the long canyon that led back into the mountains.

"Now git!" said Bill Green softly.

"Fer home, Roany, ol' Ranahan!" added Frosty Makinson.

The big steer looked at them strangely. Then up went his head and Old Roany, wobbly but high headed and free again, started hightailing it for the hills.

Old Frosty and Bill rode back around by the dam and, late that afternoon, caught up with the outfit in camp up the new trail west of the Elephant Butte Lake.

"Did you find him?" asked the foreman.

"Hell, no!" said Bill Green.

"Nope, nary a hair. Jest never come out. No Kansas City fer Ol' Roany now I reckon," added Frosty, squinting quizzically at the distant, sun purpled steeps of the mountains far over across the river.

MORAL CODES AND INDIANS

DESPITE Cooper, Catlin and other Indian enthusiasts, it is extremely doubtful if the American Indian had a moral code, especially the plains tribes. Right and wrong did not seem to exist as an abstract idea, and it is more than doubtful if the Indian had any abstract ideas at all. Their rules for deportment were based squarely on self interest and expediency. Stealing, killing, adultery, wife stealing, marrying blood relations, etc., were rated purely on utilitarian grounds. No Indian would steal from or scalp a member of his own band, but this was not because of ethics or loyalty; it could not be done without causing strife in the band and eventually destroying its strength and unity. The shame of theft was only in being found out, and the great thief was equal to the great warrior so long as his victims were outside his own band. A wrong to an unmarried woman was a blow, not at the woman, but at her father, who thus suffered a loss in her selling value; and the culprit was expected to pay her full value to her father if he was caught. The Indian was as unmoral as an animal and found no feeling of guilt in his actions. What white men believed were ethical definitions were always reducible to terms of personal indignity or injury. The wish to believe is sometimes the father of belief, and many writers saw the Indians through a rosy veil of their own making; witness Catlin, who had so much to say about the honesty of the Indian. He lived among them and saw no theft, because they did not steal from members of their own band. He gives them a code of ethics which, if true, would have resulted in their extinction long before he saw them.—*C. E. Mulford*

A CUBIT TO HIS STATURE

I'm a ruffian rat from the desert,
I'm a sourdough from Dawson and Nome,
I'm a waddy from Wyoming's ranges,
I'm a Mountie, the muskeg my home.
I'm a ranger a-ridin' the Rio,
I'm the sheriff that's sent to arrest,
I'm the rodeo buckaroo champion—
Hell, pardner, yuh know me; I'm WEST!

EXACTLY eighteen months ago this verse appeared, to announce the first birthday of the Little Brother With a Bass Voice, the feller who was born with a full head of hair, thirty-two teeth, and saddle galls.

A straight diet of sourdough bannock and mammoth meat, has given the youngster such great strength now, however, that he is busting through his clothes. He needs more room. Being as we've come to take a whole lot of pride in this hardboiled young hombre, and all his range pals are urging us, we're going to give him just the finest chance in our power. One month from today——

WEST becomes a weekly!

Your *next* issue will appear on the newsstand exactly as usual—and it's a corking number, too, as we'll show you later.

But then, during the first week of August—on a day and date to be announced in our next magazine—will appear the first number of WEST WEEKLY.

Our pledge: The magazine will in no way fall below the standard set hitherto; rather will it strive continually to make itself the *finest* outdoor fiction at any price!

And the price will remain at 15c.

$25 FOR A LETTER

TO ALL our readers who have written us their views of the fiction published in WEST, and to those who have indicated their choice among authors, our sincere thanks! WEST has had an inspiring year; and we attribute a great amount of this success to the pleasant and courteous coöperation of readers.

Now, as we have said, we are building far more pretentious plans for a better and bigger magazine. And we ask all our real friends to hop aboard, giving us their honest and frank criticism both with letters and with the briefer Target coupon system. As we have said before it is *your* magazine and we want you to have a voice in its affairs. Also we want to give recognition to those who give us suggestions. Therefore from now on until further notice we will mail a check for $25.00 as a prize to the writer of the best letter on each issue.

These letters may praise, may damn, may suggest—may take the magazine as a whole, or turn the magnifying glass upon its minutest detail. To the letter judged best each week will be awarded the $25.00 prize, and printed in full in a succeeding issue, with the writer's name and address.

Haven't *you* something you'd like to say about this very number you are reading?

And meanwhile, don't forget to include the Target coupons! They are the cornerstones of truly great issues to be offered you in the future.

THE CHUCK WAGON

REALITY—plus the romance of high adventure! That combination in our opinion makes fiction that

is individual, fiction which, beside being the best of entertainment, still is backed by solid worth.

Just think a moment. Isn't there a story or two or more in *this* issue which you—as well as we—are going to remember with pleasure?

Anyway, that's what we're driving at in WEST. Next time there is another array of authors chosen for honors by Western story readers the world over. Here is the lineup.

H. Bedford-Jones—with what is probably the speediest mystery-action complete novelette, of his we've ever encountered—and we've had the pleasure of reading many. The story's name is "The Joshaway Kid."

A. de Herries Smith—presenting a truly humorous and intimate tale of the Royal Mounted, "Trouble Wanted."

Frank C. Robertson—with Part II of his novel of ranch feuds and mystery, "Cole of King Creek."

J. Allan Dunn—with a gunsmoke complete novel of the cattle range, crammed with action and suspense, "Whispering Lead."

R. E. Hamilton— This excellent and well liked writer presents the spooky tale of a cattle country inn, where men died suddenly and in appalling fashion, "The House of the Coyote."

Walter A. Sinclair—offers another humorous rangeland yarn of Anse Curtin, "Attar of Money."

Jack Wonder—whose stern epic, "Timber Grass" is still bringing us letters of unstinted praise, comes again with a grimly dramatic short story of Texas, "Along the Trail."

A magazine of darned good entertainment!

S. OMAR BARKER

THIS author, with his first story in WEST, arises with a word of self-introduction. We liked "Ol' Roany Ranahan," and are hoping for many more tales from Mr. Barker.

"Ol' Roany, by the way, is supposed to have been a real old longhorn steer that swam the Elephant Butte Lake, as per my yarn, some years ago. I had the incident from Clarence Woody who, aside from having punched cows all over the Southwest and being a director of the Las Vegas Cowboys' Reunion, is also said to be a spittin' image of Billy the Kid.

Myself? I'm a Westerner by birth, habit, habitation and preference. Six-footer and a little more, born high—8,000 feet above the sea at Beulah, New Mexico some thirty-three years ago. Mountain ranch raised. Don't claim to know much, but do know New Mexico from end to end. Also how its wheels go 'round, having been a member of our recently deceased 7th Legislature, representing San Miguel County.

What have I done? Punched cows, farmed, taught school, worked on newspaper, been a Forest Ranger, a sergeant in the A. E. F., publicity wrangler for the Cowboys' Reunion, tootled a slide trombone in a somewhat famous Cowboys' Band, got elected to the legislature, and have, for some years, been writing stories, verses and articles for various magazines and newspapers. Have published one volume of New Mexico poems under the title *"Vientos de las Sierras"* (Winds of the Mountains) and have two more ready for 1927 issue: "Buckaroo Ballads," and "Young Timber."

If I have any fads, hobbies or special indulgences of which I ought to be ashamed, but which might interest the readers of my yarns, they are: deer hunting, trout fishing, rodeos—and Mexican songs, most of which are most appealing sung with a catarrh accompaniment.

My yarns, stories and articles have appeared in more than one hundred publications, from such solemn reviews as Life and *Judge* down to the lighter hearted *Outlook* and *Literary Digest*. Mostly, however, in magazines printing Western and action fiction, to which type of writing I am now devoting most of my time. I get an honest kick out of "making" WEST this first time and hope to be able to repeat.

—*S. Omar Barker.*

BUFFALO BUTCHERING—MOUNTAIN STYLE

EVERY now and then an old-time painted buffalo robe turns up in some pioneer collection of frontier relics. Nine times out of ten these robes will be split down the center and then neatly sewn together with sinew thread. If they are really "old"—say seventy-five to a hundred years—the sewing is likely to be a somewhat zigzag chain stitch, the characteristic plains Indian style of sewing rents. At first glance one would ask, why go to all that trouble of splitting the robe in half only to sew it together again? It has puzzled more than one casual observer.

The answer is, "Injun style of cutting up buffler." Later this style was adopted by those long haired, half wild hombres who trapped the beaver streams and raised all sorts of Hades from the Blackfoot country on the north down to "Touse" (Taos) in the south.

In those days buffalo were plentiful. At times hunters would slaughter half a dozen of the animals at a time for one meal! If a fat cow weighed on an average say of eight hundred pounds, that would mean something like forty-eight hundred pounds of prime beef; but of that amount only a very few pounds would be taken! In other words, when meat was plentiful only the choicest morsels were cut out for immediate use, the remainder of the animal being left to the birds of the air and the earth prowlers, the coyotes and wolves.

The choicest portion of a buffalo was that part of the hump projecting from the back of the neck just before the shoulders. It was about the size of a man's head and was known as the "bass." When cooked it was said to have tasted very rich, like the tender marrow.

It was for this purpose, to get at the choicest tidbits of the animal that the skin was opened along the back instead of down the belly. Next in demand were the hump and hump ribs, consisting of the projections of the vertabrae just behind the shoulders. These were generally broken off with a mallet made of the lower joint of one of the forelegs, cut off for the purpose. After these came the "fleece"—that portion of the flesh covering the ribs; the "depuis" (*depouille*)—a broad fat strip extending from the shoulders to the tail; the "belly fleece"; some of the ribs, "side ribs" so called to distinguish them from the "hump ribs"; the thigh or marrow bones and the tongue.

As a rule the animal was also opened along the belly, and the tallow and tenderloin thus secured. The remainder was often left. In times of plenty when there was plenty of "fat cow," to use mountain parlance, only the bass, hump and tongue were taken; and more often simply the tongue. Bulls were seldom killed by the mountaineers for food; in fact a mountain expression for short rations of any kind or food cooked in a manner not suited to their taste, was "poor bull," while any meat or food that was first rate, went as "fat cow." And in times of stress when anything from a jackrabbit to a mountain lion was fair prey, the saying was, "meat's meat." To remonstrate with a mountain man over the wanton slaughter of a buffalo for the tongue alone would be about as incomprehensible to him as to tell a seventy-year-old Dakota warrior that his stolen woman's sunshade was no particular benefit to his leathery complexion. In those days it was thought the buffalo would last forever; and a man who essayed to preserve them was looked upon as being a bit *"heyoka"* (crazy).

—*Arthur Woodward.*

FROM NEAR AND FAR

WE ARE delighted, Mr. Stearns, that "Timber Grass" pleased. It surely was an unconventional Western novel. We have published previous stories by Mr. Wonder, and have more to come.

Editor, WEST,
Dear Sir:

Hooray for your new anchor man, Jack Wonder! His novelette last issue, "Timber Grass," sure leaves nothing but a round hole where the bull's-eye of that Target was! I haven't seen his name before, but I'll look for some more stories by him, you bet.

That number was a peach, with my old favorite, Tuttle, and Bedford-Jones, and Walt Sinclair, too. Here is my Target with the hole in the middle. That's for "Timber Grass," remember!

Victor Stearns,
1114 Marchmont Rd.,
South Framingham, Mass.

Why not save the copies, and then read the serial installments all at once —if the intervening time is too long? We felt, Mr. Landue, that "A Cactus Cavalier," while long, was worth every bit of space devoted to it.

Editor, WEST,
Dear Sir:

I have enjoyed every issue of your good magazine since I started to read it, all except the serial stories. I didn't notice that when I started "Cactus Cavalier," and so it made me sore when I came to the "continued in our next." That's the bunk. I never did like bobbing for apples, even on Hallowe'en!

L. A. Landue,
Phoenix, Arizona.

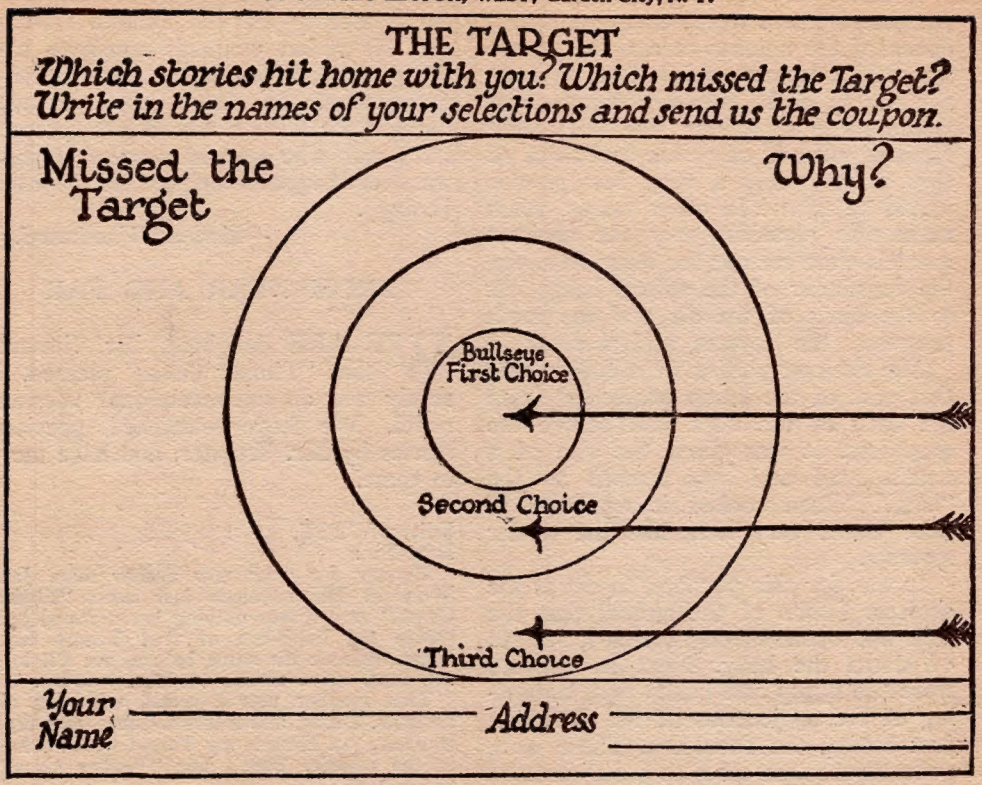
Wish yuh'd put aside every Saturday night for this same purpose, pardner!

Editor, WEST,
Dear Sir:

I have been a reader of WEST since the first publication, and like it better with each succeeding issue.

Give us more stories like "The Man Branders" by Frank C. Robertson, and "The

To TARGET EDITOR, WEST, Garden City, N. Y.



Scar Man" by Charles Alden Seltzer. They were real, salty, he-man stories.

I have never written you before but this is "my night to howl."

Success to WEST!

John J. Barclay,
Box 471,
Lindale, Ga.

No, not just a yarn, Mrs. B. In WEST'S department store the fiction counters are farther forward. We have more of Eli Colter's work scheduled for future issues. Certainly glad you liked Alabam Tenney!

Editor, WEST,
Dear Sir:

Mr. Eli Colter has surpassed himself in his last Alabam Tenney story, "One Hour Before Dawn." Tell him from us, never let Alabam Tenney drop out. A better series of short stories could not be written or better illustrate the spirit of the old Western cowboy; and in view of Eli Colter's little personal revelation in "Come An' Get It!" we think he is a wonderful man.

Mrs. B——,
Gravelbourg P. O.,
Sask., Canada.

Shake, Mr. McConnell! It surely warms the heart to receive a letter like yours.

Editor, WEST,
Dear Sir:

I've been reading WEST for almost a year, and I want to say that for an average of real, true to life, exciting Western yarns your magazine runs away from the field. I like my stories straight, without too much scenery or love stuff, but sometimes authors writing about cowboys make them damn' fools with guns in their hands or pretty sappy imitations of Nebraska farm hands in town for a milk shake. Men are mostly alike wherever they are. Put them in an unsettled range country of forty years ago, make them earn their living, cook their own grub occasional, catch and break their own horses, and fight their own battles—and almost any healthy young male will have a story worth telling inside a year. It's human nature. And a lot of your writing gang know it.

That's why, when a copy of WEST comes along with a Slivers Cassidy story, or one like Charles Alden Seltzer's "Scar Man," or a Frank C. Robertson yarn, I can park myself comfortable for a couple of hours of honest to gosh enjoyment. There are others, too. You've got them lined up—keep 'em coming!

James L. McConnell,
Buxton, Iowa.

I smiled when the butler spoke to Donovan in French

—but I gasped with surprise at my friend's reply

"CAN you speak French?" I asked Donovan one day.

"Yes, indeed," grinned Donovan, who was one of the best salesmen in our office and who hated to admit there was anything he couldn't do. "I speak it like a native Frenchman."

I could hardly keep from laughing at the idea of Donovan speaking French. But I gave no sign that I doubted his word.

"Why, you're just the man I want!" I exclaimed. "I'm going to call on Alphonse Leroux, the French perfume manufacturer, and I want you to come along and help me persuade him to sign a contract."

"Fine!" replied Donovan. "I'll be delighted!"

Donovan had the spirit of a true salesman. A mere matter of being unable to speak the same language as a customer meant nothing to him.

But I, on the other hand, was worried. I had been told that Alphonse Leroux could speak English. But if he couldn't! . . . I shuddered at the thought! Donovan would be useless to me. And I would have to depend entirely on the smattering of French I had been taught in high school.

I was nervous when Donovan and I climbed the steps leading to Leroux's home on Park Avenue. It was a fashionable place—a sort of combined residence and business office which the Frenchman used during his visits to America.

I rang the doorbell. Fervently I prayed that Leroux would be able to speak English. The door swung open and a butler appeared.

An Unexpected Shock

"Is Monsieur Leroux at home?" I asked in my friendliest manner, little expecting the shock I was to receive.

To my horror the butler replied *in French!* My heart sank:

"Of all things—a French butler!" I exclaimed to Donovan.

I turned to the butler again.

"Is Monsieur Alphonse Leroux at home?"

Instead of answering me in English, the butler continued in French. He spoke so fast I couldn't understand a word he said. "I'm lost!" I thought.

"Let me talk to him," whispered Donovan.

My friend stepped forward. "What did you say, my man?" he inquired of the butler.

The butler again rattled away in French. Donovan listened attentively, as if he were following every word.

Then Donovan Spoke Up

When the butler finished, Donovan spoke up. To my everlasting amazement he answered that butler *in fluent French!* I could scarcely believe my ears! Donovan-speaking French! It seemed incredible!

But his words had a magic effect on the butler, who suddenly blossomed into smiles, bowed low, and welcomed us into the house.

Half an hour later Donovan and I descended the steps in front of Monsieur Leroux's home. I was happy as a bird, for in my pocket was the contract, signed and sealed.

I slapped Donovan on the back. "You made a wonderful impression on Leroux!" I exclaimed. "Where on earth did you learn to speak French like that? Why . . . why . . . !"

Donovan laughed. Then he told me an interesting story.

How to Master French Without a Teacher

"Did you ever hear of the Hugo Language Institute?" he asked me.

"It's a School of Languages located over in London, isn't it?"

Donovan nodded. "It's one of the oldest language institutes in the world. They recently did a remarkable thing. Guided by their expert knowledge of language instruction—their years of experience in teaching languages—they put the secrets of their quick method into a set of printed lessons—*a set of lessons any one can study at home!*

"That's how I mastered French. I took the Hugo French Course. That course is wonderful! It's called the 'At-Sight' method—and is far ahead of all the old-fashioned methods we used to study in school. A short time ago I didn't know a word of French. Now I can speak French, read French, and understand spoken French.

"And I studied only in my spare moments. None of those tiresome exercises or classroom drills to do. It was fun. Everything was made so clear, so simple, so easy!

"Honestly, the Hugo 'At-Sight' French Course is a marvelous achievement in language instruction!"

This story is typical. You, too, can now master French at home—quickly, easily, pleasantly—just as thousands of others are doing by the celebrated Hugo "At-Sight" Method. Twenty-four fascinating lessons, carefully planned. The most ingenious method of acquiring French ever discovered. Whole generations of language-teaching experience in all the leading European cities are behind this French course.

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We shall be glad to send you the complete course FREE FOR 5 DAYS so that you may see it and judge it for yourself. Within the free examination period you have the privilege of returning the course, without cost or obligation, or keeping it as your own and sending only $2 as a first payment, and thereafter $2 a month until the full price of $12 has been paid.

You are the judge. Simply return the course within 5 days if you are not fascinated and delighted with it. If you act promptly, a valuable French-English Dictionary, containing 45,000 words, will be included, without additional cost.

We urge you to clip and mail this coupon to-day. Doubleday, Page & Co., Dept. F-296, Garden City, N. Y.

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American Representatives of Hugo's Language Institute of London,
Garden City, New York.

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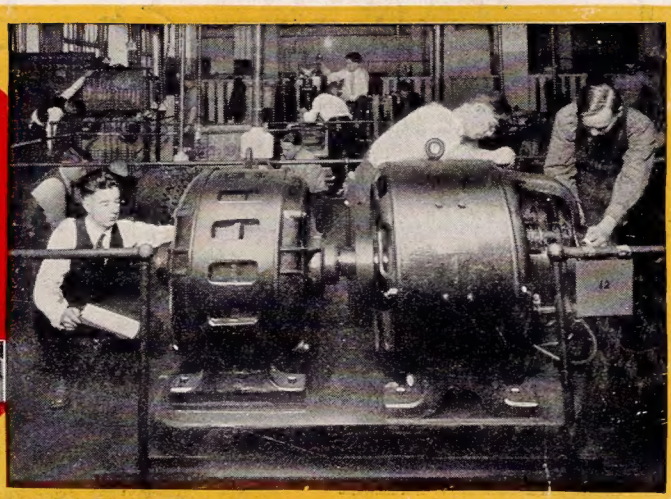

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